

Learning Disabilities: The Social Construction of a Special Education Category

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ABSTRACT: This article reinterprets the history of learning disabilities, situating it in the context of the movement to reform education after Sputnik. After Sputnik, standards for reading achievement were raised and students were tested more rigorously and grouped for instruction based on achievement level. Students unable to keep up with raised standards were placed into one of five categories. Four of the categories were used primarily to explain the failures of lower class and minority children; learning disabilities was created to explain the failures of white middle class children in a way that gave them some protection from the stigma of failure. Events during the late 1960s and early 1970s prompted a shift in the use of a category of learning disabilities, and subsequently in the category's membership. Implications of this reinterpretation for today's education reform movement are suggested.

■ Current reports of education reform advocate that schools raise standards for achievement and test students according to those standards more regularly and more rigorously. For example, *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence and Education, 1983) recommends that "schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct" (p. 27). It goes on to advocate that "standardized tests of achievement . . . should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another" (p. 28). Similarly, *Action for Excellence* (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983) recommends that we "raise both the floor and the ceiling of achievement in America" (p. 18).

These reports have been criticized for their failure to address substantively the needs of handicapped students. For example, the CEC Ad Hoc Committee to Study and Respond to the 1983 Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1984) applauded *A Nation at Risk* for its "efforts to improve curricula and methods to assess the acquisition of required skills and knowledge" (p. 488) but criticized it for its failure to address the diverse capabilities and needs of students. The Committee noted that special education has expanded over the past several decades and advocated its continuing development and provision of services. Implicitly, the CEC reply accepted existing categories of exceptionality and saw reform attempts as delinquent mainly in their failure to address the needs of students who occupy or should occupy those categories. In this article it will be argued that the problem in today's reform movement is more than mere-

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ly overlooking those who are handicapped. Rather, reforms such as those just cited help create handicapped children, and the main category for which this has been true historically is learning disabilities.

Many educators suggest that learning disabilities always has been and continues to be an ill-defined special education category. A full 20 years after the founding of the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (ACLD), the 1983 *Annual Review of Learning Disabilities* featured a series of articles by prominent scholars in the field still debating its definition and criteria for identification. Recently Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn and McGue (1982) found little difference between students classified as learning disabled (LD) and non-LD low-achievers on several psychometric tests commonly used to classify students as LD. They concluded that "we must begin to evaluate very carefully the purposes and needs being served by identifying certain students as LD while not identifying others (who are very much their twins)" (p. 84).

Why did the category come about in the first place, and whose interests has it served? This article addresses these questions by briefly critiquing the prevailing interpretation of why the category emerged when it did and who it has served, and then by showing that learning disabilities is in part an artifact of past school reform efforts that have escalated standards for literacy. In so doing, this article shows the implications of the emergence of the LD category during the early 1960s for debates about school reform in the 1980s.

PREVAILING INTERPRETATION OF THE EMERGENCE OF LD

To investigate how the history of the LD field is usually interpreted, I examined 15 learning disabilities textbooks published between 1980 and 1985 in the U.S. Textbooks were examined because they typically present the field's history in a manner conventionally accepted by professionals in the field. (Several authors drew on the interpretation of the field's history offered by J. L. Wiederholt, *Historical perspectives on the education of the learning disabled*, in L. Mann & D. Sabatino (Eds.), *The second review of special education*, Philadelphia: Journal of Special Education Press, 1974.) The average learning disabilities textbook, which was 403 pages long, devoted 10 pages to ex-

plaining how and why the field emerged when it did (range = 6-34 pages). Five did not discuss its history. (See end of article for complete list of textbooks reviewed.)

The LD field usually is presented as having developed on the basis of medical research beginning in the 1800s. This research documented links between brain damage and subsequent behavior. More recent advances in our understanding of learning disabilities are presented as having been made by psychologists, neurologists, and physicians studying children who displayed difficulties acquiring language and reading skills, and by educators who experimented with methods for teaching them. These children were believed to have suffered minimal brain dysfunction. Once sufficient research had been conducted and publicized, parents, educators, and physicians began to organize and press for appropriate educational services. Since then, schools have with growing vigor developed and provided these services.

The ideology underlying this interpretation is that schools, supported by medical and psychological research, are involved in a historic pattern of progress. Problems that have always existed are one by one being discovered, researched, and solved. Learning disabilities is essentially a medical problem; it is thought to reside within the child. Progress is brought about mainly by individual thinkers involved in medical and psychological research, and at times by pressure groups who use that research to advance the interests of the underdogs. Once alerted to problems, the American public tends to support their amelioration, and the main beneficiaries are those whose needs are finally recognized and met.

Missing from this interpretation is much analysis of the social context that created conditions favorable to the category's emergence. A sizable body of literature outside special education links school structures and processes with needs of dominant economic and political groups in society (e.g., Apple, 1981; Spring, 1976). This literature suggests that changes in schools are instituted mainly to serve more efficiently existing social and economic structures, although changes may also offer some benefit to students whom schools had previously disserved most. One school structure this literature has examined, which is closely related to special education, is tracking.

While many people see tracking as a way of homogenizing students in classrooms so teachers can teach them better, research studies have found that lower track students consistently fare worse than their nontracked counterparts (Persell, 1977) and rarely achieve upward mobility (Rosenbaum, 1976). Furthermore, those in the upper track are disproportionately from white middle class backgrounds; lower track students disproportionately represent minority and lower social class backgrounds (Shafer & Olexa, 1971). This literature argues that tracking is widely practiced largely for the purpose of sorting and preparing students for a stratified labor market: Students are rank-ordered and classified for instruction such that those from advantaged social groups tend to be prepared for the better jobs, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be channeled into low pay, low status work.

With a few exceptions (e.g., Coles, 1978; Farber, 1968; Sarason & Doris, 1979; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982), special education usually is not examined with relationship to social competition for power, wealth, and prestige. Rather, it usually is presented as a school structure instituted solely to benefit students unable to profit from school because of handicapping conditions. The textbook interpretation of the emergence of learning disabilities is an example. While there is merit to this interpretation for children with obvious handicaps (e.g., severely retarded and physically impaired), it must be questioned for children whose handicaps are not obvious. The remainder of this article does that.

SCHOOLING IN THE LATE 1950s AND EARLY 1960s

Learning disabilities was officially founded with the birth of ACLD in 1963. Learning disabled children suffer chiefly from an inability to achieve certain standards for literacy. These standards have changed historically as requirements of the American economy and the race for international supremacy have changed. Let us examine how the raising of reading standards, coupled with social expectations that schools help America's cold war effort and also sort students for future work roles in a stratified economy, led to the creation of learning disabilities.

Before the twentieth century, most information could be exchanged face to face and records were relatively simple. At that time, children with reading difficulties did not present a great social problem because most Americans did not need to be able to acquire new information through reading. 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 escalated, schools responded by emphasizing reading more and by expecting students to attain increasingly higher levels of literacy (Chall, 1983; Resnick & Resnick, 1977).

Before the 1980s, the most recent major escalation of reading standards followed the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik in 1957. Americans reacted to Sputnik by charging schools with failing to produce scientists and technicians needed for the U.S. to remain ahead internationally in technological development. This charge was widely publicized in numerous popular magazines (e.g., *Good Housekeeping*, *Time*). American schools were compared with Russian schools and found deficient. The chief problem, critics believed, was lax standards. For example, in March of 1958, *Life* magazine compared the schooling of two boys; one in Moscow and one in Chicago. It reported that in the Soviet Union, "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 10 years and finish the course" ("School Boys," p. 27). In contrast, American students lounge in classrooms that are "relaxed and enlivened by banter," and in which the "intellectual application expected of [students] is moderate" (p. 33).

Recommendations for reforming American education included (a) toughening elementary reading instruction (Trace, 1961); (b) introducing uniform standards for promotion and graduation and testing students' mastery of those standards through a regular, nation-wide examination system ("Back to the 3 R's?", 1957; Bestor, 1958); (c) grouping students by ability so the bright students can move more quickly through school and then go on to college and professional careers, while the slower students move into unskilled or semiskilled labor ("Famous Educator's Plan," 1958; "Harder Work

for Students,” 1961; Woodring, 1957); and (d) assigning the most intellectually capable teachers to the top group of students (Rickover, 1957). To some extent, all these reforms were implemented in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In reading, elementary textbooks were toughened and some tests were renormed. Chall (1977) analyzed the readability levels of widely used textbooks published between 1930 and 1973. She found elementary readers to offer progressively less challenge from 1944 until 1962; in 1962 first grade readers appearing on the market were more difficult, a trend that continued into the 1970s. There is also evidence that some widely used achievement tests were renormed shortly after Sputnik to reflect escalated standards for literacy. The 1958 version of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests were renormed in 1964; the new norms reflected average reading levels 2 to 13 months higher for students in grades 2 through 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) reported that the average gain in reading was 1.9 months at the 90th percentile, 2.6 months at the 50th, and 1.0 months at the 10th.

Many children were unable to keep up, but few blamed the raising of standards. Instead, students who scored low on reading achievement tests were personally blamed for their failure. By the early 1960s, children who failed in reading were divided into five categories, differentiated by whether the cause of the problem was presumed to be organic, emotional, or environmental, and whether the child was deemed intellectually normal or subnormal. They were called slow learners, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, culturally deprived, and learning disabled.

Slow learners and the mentally retarded were distinguished mainly on the basis of IQ: Those scoring between 75 and 90 were considered slow learners, and those scoring below were considered retarded. Both categories included disproportionate numbers of low-income children and children of color. As adults, slow learners were expected to occupy semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, and retarded individuals were expected to occupy unskilled occupations or work in sheltered workshops (Goldstein, 1962). The emotionally disturbed also included large numbers from low-income

backgrounds (Dunn, 1963). A subcategory was the “socially maladjusted,” who were concentrated in Black, Puerto Rican, and immigrant neighborhoods (Shaw & McKay, 1942). A fourth category, which overlapped considerably with the previous three, was referred to as the culturally deprived. The National Conference on Education and Cultural Deprivation held in 1964 identified them 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, & Hess, 1965). They were believed severely handicapped by home environments that lacked environmental stimuli; systematic ordering of stimuli sequences; language training; and training in the value of intellectual work, delayed gratification, individuality, and the belief that hard work brings success (e.g., Deutsch, 1963; Riessman, 1962).

A fifth category came to be known as the learning disabled. Of the five categories, this is the only one for which descriptions of the kinds of neighborhoods most likely to produce them were virtually absent from literature. The closest statement one finds is that they are essentially “normal” or come from “normal family stock” (Strauss & Lehtinen, 1963, p. 112), whatever that means (Strauss and Lehtinen, reknown pioneers in learning disabilities research, reported 12 case studies that give some indication of what “normal family stock” meant to them. Of the eight whose race was specified, all were white, and of the four whose race was not specified, two were of “above average” social standing or home environment. (No data were given for the other two.)

The cause of LD reading retardation was believed to be organic. Hypothesized causes included minimal brain damage (e.g., Strauss & Kephart, 1955), a maturational lag in general neurological development (e.g., Bender, 1957; Rabinovitch, 1962), a failure of the brain to establish cerebral dominance (Orton, 1937), or a failure to achieve certain stages of neurological development (Delcato, 1959).

WHO WAS CLASSIFIED AS LEARNING DISABLED?

National-level statistics were not collected on the student composition of LD classes until the late 1970s. While the category was in name open to children of any background, I sus-

pected it would be populated by a select group during the early years of its existence. To estimate the student composition of LD classes, I examined descriptions of samples of LD students used in research studies published between 1963 and 1973 in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *Exceptional Children*, and the *Journal of Special Education*. To be included in my analysis, the study had to specify either that sample students were in LD classes, were identified by the school district as learning disabled although they may not yet have been assigned to LD classes, attended a private clinic for LD students, or attended a private reading clinic and were suspected by the clinic or the researcher as being learning disabled. Not included were samples of low achievers in general, retarded readers in general, or samples from programs that combined LD students with students in other special education categories.

A total of 61 studies with LD samples were located. Of these, 12 reported the racial composition of their samples; this made a total of 460 subjects whose race was known. These subjects were overwhelmingly white: 98.5% were white, only 1.5% were of color. In 10 of the 12 studies, samples were all white. Sixteen studies reported the social class composition of their samples, totalling 588 subjects whose social class background was known. There was more balance with respect to social class than race: 69% of the subjects were middle class or higher, 31% were lower middle class or lower. Of the 16 studies, 12 had samples that were at least 90% middle class or above.

The literature offers additional evidence that students in LD classes were overwhelmingly white and middle class during the category's first 10 years. White and Charry (1966) studied characteristics of children in special programs in Westchester County, New York, and found those labeled "brain damaged" to have no significant IQ or achievement differences from those labeled "culturally deprived," but to be from significantly higher social class backgrounds. Franks (1971) surveyed Missouri school districts that received state reimbursement for LD and educable mentally retarded (EMR) services during school year 1969-1970. He found the LD classes to be almost 97% white and 3% Black, while the EMR classes were only 66% white and 34% Black. Furthermore, the professional literature during the 1960s and early 1970s discussed failing children of the white

middle class and those of lower class and minority families as if they were distinct. For example, volumes 1 and 3 of the *Journal of Learning Disabilities* (1968, 1970) contained 12 articles about culturally "deprived" or "disadvantaged" children. Most of these reported studies; none of the subjects were reported to be in LD classes (many were in Head Start programs), and only two authors suggested they could or should be (Grotberg, 1970; Tarnopol, 1970).

The learning disabilities category probably was not consciously established just for white middle class children, even though it was populated mainly by them. It was established for children who, given the prevailing categories used to describe failing children, did not seem to fit any other category. Since most educators explained the failures of children of color and lower socioeconomic backgrounds with reference to the other four categories, such children tended not to have been placed in LD classes. White middle class parents and educators who saw their failing children as different from poor or minority children pressed for the creation and use of this category. By defining the category in terms of organic causality and IQ score, the white middle class preserved for itself some benefits.

First, the use of IQ to help distinguish LD students from other categories of failing children suggested its members "really" belonged in the middle or upper tracks or ability groups. As proponents of tracking during the late 1950s clearly pointed out, students were to be sorted for differentiated education based on ability, and members of each track were destined to hold different kinds of jobs in the labor market (e.g., Woodring, 1957). White children tend to score about 15 points higher on IQ tests than children of color, ensuring a greater likelihood that they would be seen as intellectually "normal" and thus potentially able to fill higher status positions. The intent of defining the category partly on the basis of IQ score was probably not to disadvantage the "disadvantaged" further, but to provide failing children whom educators saw as intellectually normal their best chance for moving ahead as rapidly and as far as possible.

Second, distinguishing between environmental and organic causes of failure helped legitimate the "superiority" of white middle class culture. The literature during the early

1960s contains much about the failings of low-income homes, and especially those of people of color. For example, readers of *Saturday Review* in 1962 were told that "slow learners appear most frequently in groups whose home environment affords restricted opportunity for intellectual development" ("Slow Learners," p. 53), and that "culturally deprived children" learn "ways of living [that] are not attuned to the spirit and practice of modern life" ("Education and the Disadvantaged American," p. 58). One does not find similar condemnations of the average white middle class home. If one were to accept such homes as normal, organic explanations for failure would seem plausible. One must view this as peculiar, since the main proponents of raising school standards to help America retain economic and political international supremacy were members of the white middle class. Yet rather than questioning the culture that viewed children as raw material for international competition, most educators questioned the organic integrity of members of that culture who could not meet the higher demands.

Third, some viewed minimal brain dysfunction as an organ deficiency that could potentially be cured in the same way diseases can be cured. The cure was hypothesized as involving the training of healthy brain cells to take over functions of damaged cells (e.g., Cruickshank et al., 1961; Frostig & Horne, 1964; Strauss & Lehtinen, 1963), the promoting of overall neurological development (e.g., 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 (e.g., Feingold, 1975; Sroufe & Stewart, 1973). Professionals may have cautioned against overoptimism, but the popular press did not. For example, in 1959, *Newsweek* readers were told about "Johnnies" with "very high IQ's" who can't read due to inherited neurological conditions. These "Johnnies" were described as educationally treatable using the Gillingham reading method; "Of the 79 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, *Reader's Digest* provided case descriptions of children who were brain-injured at birth and experienced difficulty learning language, physical movements, and reading. A new program for motor development by Delcato and the Doman brothers was reported to "activate

the millions of surviving [brain] cells to take over the functions of the dead ones" (Maisel, 1964, p. 137). Prognosis was reported excellent, and readers were told that it even helped affected children learn to read.

Probably due to these optimistic perceptions, students in LD classes seem to have suffered lesser negative teacher attitudes than other categories of failing students. Research studies have found that regular teachers see the LD student as less different from the "norm" than the ED or EMR student, and as demanding less of their time and patience (Moore & Fine, 1978; Shotel, Iano, & McGettigan, 1972; Williams & Algozzine, 1979), even when they observe behavior that contradicts their expectations for the label (Foster & Ysseldyke, 1976; Salvia, Clark, & Ysseldyke, 1973; Ysseldyke & Foster, 1978). Studies have not compared teacher attitudes toward LD and "culturally deprived" students, but there is evidence that teachers have more negative attitudes toward and lower expectation of children of color and lower class children than white or middle class children (e.g., Anyon, 1981; Jackson & Cosca, 1974; Rist, 1970).

Whether teacher attitudes toward various categories of exceptionality actually affected how students were taught in school has not been reported in the literature. However, there is evidence from outside special education that teacher attitudes toward children based on social class or presumed intellectual ability do affect the quality and amount of instruction they give (e.g., Brookover et al., 1979; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Rist, 1970). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that teachers gave more and better instruction to low-achieving students labeled as learning disabled than to low-achieving students bearing other labels, even if actual behavioral differences among such students would not in itself warrant differential treatment.

LEARNING DISABILITIES IN THE 1970s

Since the early 1970s, there has been a shift in who has been classified as learning disabled and how the category has been used politically. That shift was propelled by a decline in the late 1960s in school standards for achievement, the civil rights movement and subsequent school responses, and a redefinition of mental retardation.

Although standards for school achievement were raised immediately after Sputnik, student test scores have caused many to believe standards were not maintained, for a variety of reasons (Goodlad, 1984). Declines in SAT scores, beginning in about 1966, have been widely publicized, and some state achievement tests also have shown declines (Boyer, 1983). One would think that if standards for achievement dropped during the late 1960s, fewer students would have been seen as failures and interest in classifying students as learning disabled would have waned. What happened was the reverse, due to other social developments.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, minority groups pressured schools to discard the notion of cultural deprivation and stop classifying disproportionate numbers of minority children as mentally retarded. In 1973, the category of mental retardation was redefined, lowering the maximum IQ score from one standard deviation below the mean to two (Grossman, 1973), which dissolved the category of slow learner. The intent of these moves was to pressure schools to teach a wider diversity of students more effectively. Instead, many students who previously were or would have been classified as retarded, slow, or culturally deprived were now classified as learning disabled.

For example, based on a study of the racial composition of LD and MR classes in over 50 school districts between 1970 and 1977, Tucker (1980) found Black students overrepresented in MR classes but underrepresented in LD classes until 1972. After 1972, the proportion of the total school population in MR classes declined and Blacks lost some overrepresentation in that category, but they rapidly gained representation in LD classes, where they were overrepresented by 1974. Thus, even though pressure may have subsided during the late 1960s and early 1970s to provide a protected placement for failing white middle class children, learning disabilities has been used increasingly as a more palatable substitute for other categories to "explain" the failure of lower class children and children of color.

LEARNING DISABILITIES AND TODAY'S REFORM MOVEMENT

In the 1980s, educators and the public are again viewing children as raw material for international competition, very much like during the

late 1950s. Standards for achievement are again seen as too low, and schools are again being called upon to raise standards for reading, math, science, and computer literacy, and to test students more rigorously based on those raised standards. What will be done with those who do not measure up to the new standards? When standards were raised previously, failing children were defined as handicapped and segregated. Learning disabilities was created to explain the failure of children from advantaged social groups, and to do so in such a way that it suggested their eventual ability to attain relatively higher status occupations than other low achievers.

Schools need to focus much greater attention on how to teach children rather than on how to categorize those who do not learn well when offered "business-as-usual." But it is not enough to search for better ways to remediate those who have the greatest difficulty achieving standards for school success as long as society still expects schools to produce "products" with certain kinds of skills developed to certain levels of competence, and to rank-order those "products" based on their achievement of those skills. Those who come out on the bottom will still be destined for the lowest paying jobs or the reserve labor force and will still experience the pain of failure when compared to their peers. And members of advantaged social groups will still advocate treating their failing children in ways that maintain their advantaged status as much as possible. We need to shift our perspective from the failings of individuals or the inefficiencies of schools to the social context of schooling. Rather than attempting to remake children to fit social needs, we must first give greater consideration to the possibility that society's expectations for children and society's reward structure for their performance may need remaking.

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