

Schooling For Children With Learning Disabilities

One aspect of education that seems to have been ignored, overlooked, or forgotten is the number of children living among us who very clearly have learning problems which prevent them from reaching their full potential. For this reason alone, it is time we give this problem our attention for, unlike the blindness which strikes down so many children each year, or the physical disabilities which cannot be missed, there are other forms of disability that do not readily meet the eye until the child begins going to school where, to everybody's surprise, he then shows evidence of being unable to cope or absorb any measure of learning.

What is a parent to do in such a case for, surprisingly, except for one "special school" catering to children with Down's Syndrome, there is only one private English medium tutorial that is ready and willing to admit these children and having admitted them absorb them into the regular class. Yet, considering a disorder as widespread as this appears to be, there are obviously a number of children whom, as a result, receive little or no schooling, that we feel it is time to focus our might on this neglected aspect of our education system.

Whether it is feasible or not to absorb children with special learning problems into the so-called "normal" classes of "normal" students without disrupting the process of learning, is a question that needs to be answered by the experts but, as laymen, of one thing we can be fairly certain, children with learning disabilities do need special attention from teachers trained in this line. Whether such training can take place in the so-called "normal" schools or only in "special schools" and similar institutions, as is the practice in most advanced countries, should be thrown open to debate so that we can form a consensus on what will be best for our disadvantaged children for, among such children we may find the psychologically maladjusted to the hyperactive to the autistic, all of whom need special handling.

Unfortunately, most of us have no clear understanding of the needs of special children, even when we are unfortunate to have one of our own. Often too, parents and teachers are unable to identify them early enough to do any good and may think they are dealing with a difficult child and this is made more difficult by those skeptics who insist there is nothing physically wrong with the child. But as increasingly, we know this not to be true, except in some cases, for we are now familiar with the effect of protein energy malnutrition which is so prevalent in people in Bangladesh, for it robs them of their vitality rendering them incapable of benefitting from any learning process.

As this may not be the only cause for a child's learning disability, we must consider other causes too but these do not always catch the eye of doctors, even when brought to their notice. Sometimes behavioural problems associated with upbringing may be a more fitting explanation but, the difficulty we have as laymen, is to know which is which. In some cases, reduced metabolic activity in the brain indicates a metabolic disorder. Although it is not clear what causes these metabolic differences (although heredity is known to play a role), the link between brain chemistry and behaviour now appears to be certain.

Like hyperactive children, children with learning disabilities are impulsive, overactive, aggressive and easily distracted. Many cannot control their movements and mental activity, or their emotions which makes them, in turn, difficult to control. Many doctors resort to drugs to control undesirable behavioural symptoms, but there are also those who believe this is just a way to keep bothersome children quiet. However, if drugs are used, they should be used only until the child's behaviour is made tolerable, after which therapy may be called for to attack the emotional side of the illness. Parents and other members of the family must be willing participants in such therapy if the goal of teaching the child how to listen, how to attend, and how to pay closer attention to what other people are trying to tell him, is at all to be achieved. And it goes without saying that a better understanding of the physical causes of learning disabilities could go a long way in helping teachers improve their teaching methods.