



The Community School

*For the child whose  
potential exceeds performance*

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# Learning Disabilities and the Closing of the Frontier: The Huck Finn Syndrome

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I had not heard the term *learning disability* when I began my first teaching assignment, a seventh grade class in a busy inner city neighborhood. Moreover, during that first year, no colleague ever mentioned it. I suspect it was unknown among my colleagues as well. Of course, I'd heard about dyslexia in my college courses but that was something exotic and easily recognized. I would not be likely to come across it in the mainstream classroom.

The difficulty in recognizing learning disability presents many problems for the classroom teacher. In that first year, one of my seventh grade pupils was an obviously bright young man, charming and agreeable but totally uninterested in school and frequently truant. Since that time, I've met many like him. I call it the "Huck Finn" syndrome. This child is most at home in overalls

and bare feet with a fishing rod slung over his shoulder. He is polite, not wishing to cause any trouble, and his only goal is to escape the constraints of an organized and confining society.

How difficult it is to understand and explain such a child! Grasping that he is bright, one easily interprets his lack of involvement as lack of interest. The possibility of a specific disability in learning does not present itself. Did I ask him to read? Did I assess his ability to write and spell? No. I considered him a behavior problem, though likable, and sought the guidance counselor.

It's essential that classroom teachers be able to spot those children who have specific learning disabilities without being distracted by the behavioral manifestations. The child who is

easily identified by an alert teacher in kindergarten or first grade is hard to recognize when he is twelve or thirteen. He has, by that time, learned well the art of disguising his problems and takes great care not to be exposed. He appears most often to be an uninterested, unmotivated and poorly disciplined student. The parents may come in for some blame as well when they are seen as indulgent and unable to exert sufficient control. We often hear teachers complain that this child is spoiled. The manifestations of difficulty in learning are usually seen as secondary to the objectionable behavior.

The experiences of a charming, highly intelligent third grader in a good suburban school with whom I worked some time ago are typical. An only child, his parents, who were financially comfortable, met his every wish and were at his disposal at all times. His teacher related his immaturity, restlessness, disruptiveness, impulsiveness, difficulty in attending, lack of perseverance, poor spelling, handwriting, reading and math to parent indulgence rather than to basic, innate, organic problems in maturation.

Though displaying the vocabulary and verbal skills of a much older child plus a considerable wealth of experience and sophistication, this child was, at eight years and six months, unable to tie his own shoes, read the hour hand on a clock, or memorize reliably the basic addition facts. Further testing revealed a classic learning disability which might readily have been apparent to any teacher with a few informal means of diagnosis at hand. In days past such a child, usually male, might just “lite out for the frontier”<sup>\*</sup> where he could roam free and use successfully those skills in which he truly excels: manual, physical, and social. He would also be free to demonstrate his true intellectual competence through his ability to problem solve

and outsmart. Think Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Butch Cassidy.

The Huck Finns of today face quite another set of circumstances. There is no frontier to “lite out” to, and riding and roping are not very practical anymore. The *new* frontier requires skills: reading, writing, speaking and math. Advanced, disciplined schooling is essential. To this end, Community School is playing a very important role in providing an alternative to the Horace Greeley advice, “Go West, young man.”

We now have some truly effective tools to identify our modern day Huck Finns. Children with developmental psycholinguistic delays and perceptual and motor deficits are diagnosed formally through a battery of standardized tests of intelligence, perception and achievement. The resulting profiles allow us to design appropriate remedial interventions through which we are able to address a wide range of discrepancies between promise and performance. Our tests may show a high I.Q., yet practical difficulty in accessing and organizing information may impede achievement.

At the same time, performance at home and in the community may be appropriate. Our child may have friends, excel at sports, carry out chores competently and willingly, and show a range of age appropriate interests. This child is likely to do especially well when, as our founder, Dr. Beatrice Lieben used to say, “we put him in business for himself.” These children are often quite competent when following their own interests and initiating and carrying out often well conceived plans. When the demand is imposed or the scene is coercive, the child is more likely to withdraw or rebel. It is at school that the problems become apparent.

At school, the necessity of having to attend to subject matter that holds no intrinsic interest or instructional methods that are ponderous and authoritarian is off-putting; this child will react with boredom, lacking sufficient controls for conventional tolerance. In spite of all the beguiling insouciance on the surface, this seemingly carefree child is often quite fragile. Resources to deal with frustration are limited.

A school whose mission is to make education and life possible for such children must consider these limitations. Programs that engage the intellect and encourage interests will be successful. A school that can offer outlets for creativity, interests, talents and abilities will command the energies and the fundamental urge to achieve that we believe are inherent in these complex children.

On the other hand, we are also aware of the negatives that hamper performance. These children are often inclined to avoid responsibility. They are frequently unwilling to accept poor or mediocre results, or outright failure. As a consequence, this fragile self-esteem will often send them on the "all or nothing" path - an attitude of "my way or no way" complicating the adjustment. This sense of vulnerability shows itself in a perfectionist self-definition. The flawed self-image prevents risk taking in academic performance. Better to be seen as *unmotivated* rather than *unable*. Studies show that, for many of our children, their sense of incompetence persuades them to attribute success on school tasks to luck rather than to their own abilities or efforts.

It is important that programs for learning disabled children recognize this tendency to avoid taking responsibility. The therapeutic environment must, in addition to

providing encouragement, be equally committed to holding children accountable.

In short, the Huck Finn syndrome reminds us that therapeutic programs like those at Community School are twofold. While encouraging and supporting individual abilities and developing strong self-esteem, our therapeutic programs will also grasp the full extent of the negative tendencies and work to correct them. The real world is made up of consequences as well as rewards for all of our students, Huck Finns included.

The Professional Monograph Series

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