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Coles G S. The learning-disabilities test battery: empirical and social issues.

Harvard Educ. Rev. 48:313-40, 1978.

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Despite the failure of validation research to support the use of learning-disabilities tests, children continue to be diagnosed and labeled as learning disabled. An understanding of this research and categorization requires going beyond empirical issues and identifying an underlying "blaming the victim" ideology and social function. [The *SC1*® and *SSC1*® indicate that this paper has been cited in over 90 publications.]

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For a few years before the publication of this paper, I had been working with and writing about the severe literacy and learning problems of children and adults. At the same time, the learning-disabilities (LDs) field, which asserted it had identified minimal neurological dysfunctions that could impede learning in otherwise normal persons, had grown exponentially. I began reading its research with the expectation that I would better understand learning and literacy problems. However, the more I read, the more most of the research seemed erroneous and some of it, pseudoscientific; that is, the research not only failed to substantiate its central claim, it frequently seemed intent on "proving" the neurological-deficit theory with contorted methodology and logic.

Who were the learning disabled, I wondered, the children or the professionals? I concluded that many in the latter group had problems understanding the children because of views shaped by an ideology and social organization that blamed social and cognitive differences on individual or group biology.

Around the time I wrote the cited paper, and with respect to children's learning, genetic explanations of racial differences in IQ-test results were the most prominent expression in the long history of these biological determinist arguments.

The paper was not part of what should have been a disinterested scientific debate about the neuropsychology of LDs and dyslexia. The LD research had never been that. Rather, it played a partisan, practical role of establishing "facts" for the field's foregone conclusion about the cause of the academic problems of millions of schoolchildren. Unfortunately, the consequences of LD claims proved to be dismal for most of the children: diagnosis of a neurological condition not yet shown to exist and treatment for the "condition" in special-education classes led to misdirected education, continued academic underachievement, and deeper emotional problems for the children.

Right from the emergence of the LD field in the mid-1960s, many professionals had been dubious about its thesis. The schism has grown, and I think that the writing of those who have looked for alternative explanations accounts in great part for the number of times the paper has been cited. Among those who I believe hated the paper, there have never been more than occasional oblique references to it in their writing—never a direct challenge. They continue to behave as if they "just knew" that the kids have neurological "glitches" and have maintained their relentless support of LD practice.

This paper began a decade of work that culminated recently in a book.¹ Upon rereading the paper for this commentary, though I thought that it still stands pretty well by itself, I was also aware of the development of and changes in both my criticism² (which was the focus of this paper) and alternative theory^{3,4} (much influenced by L.S. Vygotsky's work⁵). Though youngsters continue to be diagnosed LD, I remain encouraged because I see the biological determinists losing ground. I know good arguments are never sufficient, but they are necessary tools for progressive change.

1. Coles G S. *The learning mystique: a critical look at "learning disabilities."* New York: Pantheon, 1987. 330 p.

2. ———. Evaluation of genetic explanations of reading and learning problems. *J. Spec. Educ.* 14:365-83, 1980.

3. ———. The use of Soviet psychological theory in understanding learning dysfunctions.

Amer. J. Orthopsychiat. 53:619-28, 1983.

4. Coles G S & Goldstein L. Hemispheric EEG activation and literacy development. *Int. J. Clin. Neuropsychol.* 7:3-7, 1985.

5. Vygotsky L S. *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. 159 p. (Cited 370 times.)

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