

Learning

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referred for assessment.

■ Locally, the Special School District of St. Louis County was established in 1957 to educate 1,000 students with mental retardation, orthopedic handicaps, or hearing or visual impairments. Now it serves some 22,000 students — 59 percent of whom have been labeled learning disabled.

What do such startling statistics actually reflect? Is the number of "educationally handicapped" children increasing, or — as a number of experts now are suggesting — is the American school system simply failing to teach a growing number of its students?

Who's At Fault?

Thomas Armstrong, former special education teacher and author of "In Their Own Way," no longer believes in learning disabilities. Instead, he says, children exhibit learning differences — something to which our schools have lost the ability to respond.

"We treat these children like pieces of defective merchandise that need to be sent back to the shop for repairs. In reality, what needs to be repaired is our system of education," he says.

Educational psychologist Gerald Coles wrote "The Learning Mystique" in 1987 specifically to debunk what he calls a "phenomenon" that relegates children to special-education classes, stigmatizes them as intellectually inferior and sometimes subjects them to unproven drug treatment as well.

"Mountains of research have failed to prove the theory that these children have some mysterious neurological deficits — and failed to provide a rationale for programs that diagnose and treat them," he says.

Certainly, experts like Coles and Armstrong believe there are children who exhibit genuine learning problems. But for the vast majority of them, such problems may be caused by mismatches between learning styles and classroom demands, not biological abnormalities.

"Clearly, there are kids who have difficulty processing information and making sense of the data. But when the fit isn't good, is that the child's fault? Or is it the school that is disabled instead?" wonders Thomas Hoerr, director of New City School here.

Hoerr advocates education based on a theory of multiple intelligences. This theory, first described by Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner in his book "Frames of Mind," holds that intelligence is more than a singular entity, like an I.Q. test.

"Intelligence," says Gardner, "is the ability to solve a problem or fashion a product that is valued in at least one culture or community."

Other Intelligences

While conventional U.S. schools and standardized achievement tests recognize only two of these intelligences — language and math abilities — Gardner says there are at least seven kinds that could, and should, be nurtured.

Briefly, they are:

■ **Linguistic** — ability to use language in many forms — reading, writing, talking, telling stories. Poets exhibit linguistic intelligence.

■ **Musical** — sensitivity to nonverbal sounds — rhythms, pitch, tonal patterns. Composers exhibit musical intelligence.

■ **Logical-mathematical** — ability to discern patterns and relationships, and to approach and solve problems methodically and precisely. Scientists exhibit logical-mathematical intelligence.

■ **Spatial** — ability to visualize things, and to solve puzzles, build or create representational drawings. Architects, sailors and chess players exhibit spatial intelligence.

■ **Bodily-kinesthetic** — ability to use one's body to solve problems and communicate; usually highly coordinated, tactile individuals. Surgeons and dancers exhibit bodily-kinesthetic intelligence.

■ **Interpersonal** — ability to be sensitive and understanding of others; good at sharing and cooperation. Politicians, salespeople and teachers exhibit interpersonal intelligence.

■ **Intrapersonal** — sensitivity to one's inner feelings, knowing one's strengths and

weaknesses. People with self-understanding — the ability to choose the right spouse, job, etc. — exhibit intrapersonal intelligence.

How does this theory of multiple intelligences apply to educating all children, and particularly those who have learning differences — most of them language-based?

Simply put, everyone has some degree of every intelligence. But for the majority of kids labeled as learning disabled, linguistic intelligence is not a strength.

A teacher who presents lessons traditionally — by "talking at" the class and providing supplemental reading and writing material — is dooming that child to failure. By presenting the same material in multisensory ways instead, each student can learn via his particular area of intelligence.

Hoerr likes to illustrate the point by talking about the approach New City School takes when teaching a unit on popcorn to a first-grade class.

Before embracing the multiple-intelligences theory, the children would read about popcorn, talk about it, maybe write a story about it. Now, in addition to that, they might pop some popcorn, take the lid off the pot, see how far the kernels would go, and chart the distances. They also would use the kernels to make rhythm instruments. They might compose popcorn poetry. And they might dramatize the act of a popcorn kernel getting popped.

In this way, every child in the class — whether he is strongest at spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, linguistic or logical-mathematical intelligence — would "own" the lesson.

A Reading List For Parents A

INTERESTED in learning more about learning — and learning disabilities? Here are 10 books to help you get started:

■ **"Developmental Variation and Learning Disorders,"** by Dr. Melvin Levine (Educators Publishing Service, \$49.75)

"Endangered Minds: Why Our Children Don't Think," by Jane M. Healy (Simon and Schuster, \$11)

"The Essential Partnership," by Dr. Stanley Greenspan (Penguin Books, \$8.95)

"Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences," by Howard Gardner (Basic Books Inc., \$12.95)

"In Their Own Way: Discovering and Encouraging Your Child's Personal Learning Style," by Thomas Armstrong (G.P. Putnam's Sons, \$9.95)

"The Learning Mystique: A Critical Look at 'Learning Disabilities,'" by Gerald Coles (Fawcett Columbine, \$14.95)

"The Misunderstood Child: A Guide for Parents of Children With Learning Disabilities," by Dr. Larry Silver (TAB Books, \$9.95)

"No Easy Answers: The Learning Disabled Child at Home and at School," by Sally L. Smith (Bantam Books, \$5.99)

"Smart Kids With School Problems: Things to Do and Ways to Help," by Priscilla L. Vail (Plume, \$10.95)

"Succeeding Against the Odds: Strategies and Insights From the Learning Disabled," by Sally L. Smith (Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc., \$12.95)

Following are three books geared for

Merely Late Bloomers?

Alluring as the theory of multiple intelligences may be, many educators do not see it as a panacea for school reform or guaranteeing the success of children who learn differently.

"Many kids diagnosed as learning disabled may just be idiosyncratic in the way they learn," says Richard Lavoie, director of Riverview School in East Sandwich, Mass.

"But the term 'learning difficulties' doesn't demonstrate the severity of problems some children experience. Gardner is on to something, but his theory shouldn't be used to take away special services from kids who really need them."

Says educational psychologist Jane Healy: "I've never seen a dyslexic kid learn to decode words accurately in the art room. It's great to showcase everyone's talents, but compensatory teaching to achieve literacy is crucial, too."

Healy, author of "Endangered Minds," says in today's electronic, fast-paced culture parents don't spend much time talking or reading with their children. So, many kids — with or without learning differences — aren't going to school with the language and listening skills they need to succeed.

Since the culture isn't going to change, schools will have to, she says.

"The idea that everyone will come to school able to read the same page at the same time in first grade is as silly a notion as saying that next Tuesday Jane Healy will be singing

And Students

children with learning disabilities:

"All Kinds of Minds: A Young Student's Book About Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders," by Dr. Melvin Levine (Educators Publishing Service, \$22)

"Keeping a Head in School: A Student's Book About Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders," by Dr. Melvin Levine (Educators Publishing Service, \$22)

"Looking Through the I's of the Learning Disabled," by students of The Churchill School (\$7)

An excellent videotape for the entire family is "Understanding Learning Disabilities: How Difficult Can This Be? The F.A.T. City Workshop," by Richard Lavoie (PBS Video, \$39.95)

opera," she says. "Children have different skill levels — and different timetables for development."

Armstrong believes many kids labeled as learning disabled may simply be late bloomers. He points out that Albert Einstein was 8 when he learned to read — and Woodrow Wilson was 11.

Not only should children not be expected to perform the same tasks at exactly the same time, says Armstrong, but they shouldn't have to perform them in the same way, either.

"Who says you have to learn to read sitting quietly at your desk? Why couldn't you learn the consonant sounds while hopping on your right foot, and the vowel sounds while hopping on your left?" he asks.

It's a question worth pondering — especially when you consider that there are first-grade classes in St. Louis County where 30 percent of the boys are reportedly being treated with Ritalin for attention deficit disorders.

15 Kids To A Class

What other educational innovations could help children — especially those with learning differences — succeed in school?

Both Healy and Coles strongly advise smaller classes — a maximum of 15 students per room would be ideal. They also call for better-trained teachers with backgrounds in child development and the neuropsychology of learning as well as in multisensory methods of presenting information.

"Research has overwhelmingly shown that small class size, at least in the early grades, produces much more successful literacy and fewer referrals and classifications in special education," says Coles. "It also gives teachers the time to know each student, understand his learning style, address his needs individually and resolve his difficulties."

There aren't many parents, educators or politicians who would disagree with that. But with local, state and federal governments strapped for cash, how realistic are these recommendations?

"When this country wanted to send a man to the moon, no one said, 'You can only have 15 engineers to solve the problem.' But in education, we assume there are limited means," says Coles.

"Schools should look first at how to address the problem, irrespective of contemporary conditions. Then we should provide the needed resources."

Pie-in-the-sky thinking? Anything but, says Healy.

"Many kids require one-on-one work with specially trained teachers. It's a tremendously expensive proposition, but so is the idea of building more and more prisons," she says. "And we know that all too often, school failure leads to high rates of delinquency."