

BOOK REVIEWS

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ON BEING LEARNING DISABLED:

Perspectives and Strategies of Young Adults

Stephen T. Murphy

New York: Teachers College Press, 1992, 154 pp.

Learning Disabilities is a phenomena under much scrutiny with thousands of research studies attempting to discover various truths. Murphy adds to the growing literature in this field by summarizing interviews with 49 individuals who have acquired the formal label "learning disabled." Interviewees comment on being labeled learning disabled, managing school and college, getting along socially, and managing the workplace, each of which occupies a chapter in the book. The final section contains Murphy's comments on changing the learning disabilities emphasis from an internal, fix-the-person set of strategies to external, change-the-system approaches.

General Highlights

- Introduction to the development of the learning disability label is succinctly provided and the major issues surrounding diagnosis are elaborated upon.
- Interviews are summarized in short segments as they reinforce the general themes and trends within chapter content areas.
- There is an emphasis on the development of informal strategies consisting of creative adaptations to environmental challenges.
- Instead of relaying dominant characteristics of people who are learning disabled, sample statements from a range of experiences are the rule. People with learning disabilities are unique individuals whose personal circumstances have more to do with environmental variables than a shared label.
- Murphy concludes that specific assistance for

all students in need of support would be a better systems response to academic difference among students rather than "label" specific resources that stigmatize a few.

Specific Areas of Excellence

- "The concept of learning disabilities is surrounded by controversy and debate. The term has been called more political than scientific, more societal than individual, and more stigmatizing than helpful." (p. 14) Murphy provides a detailed account of the various factions within the field of learning disabilities who hold differing opinions about the precise diagnostic and prescriptive nature of what constitutes learning disabilities.
- "Despite such diversity, one common thread that ran through the results was that learning disabilities were indigenous to educational settings." (p. 20) Most of the 49 interviewees identified being diagnosed in an academic setting and not from experiences outside of school. "Interviewees frequently stated that they were diagnosed because they happened to be at the right place, at the right time, with the right person." (p. 27)
- "For some people the label brought psychological, education, and social relief; for others it was emotionally upsetting and was rejected as inappropriate." (p. 47) There are many paradoxes in the stories of the people interviewed and in each of the areas investigated there were both positive and negative experiences.
- "Specific formal accommodations (in school) included extended time for examinations and course assignments, tutoring and proofreading services, use of tape recorders in class, textbooks on tape, and reduced course loads. . . . Informal accommodations included the manipulation of instructors and the use of parental and peer assistance." (p. 49)
- "Often neglected (from professional attention) are the stigma, the social and psychological dilemma, and the consequent individual adjustments that accompany formal, remedial, and accommodative procedures." (p. 76)
- "They described the employment arena as a world that could not be easily managed through

the formal strategies they had learned and employed in previous settings, especially previous educational situations.” (p. 117)

Areas in which this Publication Could be Enhanced

- The most recent references in the book are from 1990 even though the publication date is 1992. The interested reader may want to review some of the more current references contained in the articles of this current issue of *JVR*.
- Reading other first-person accounts of the services and supports being provided to adults in vocational settings provides a reality check of the scope and fit of adequate supports.
- The book contains a brief introduction to natural supports and its orientation to workers with the label of learning disabled. Murphy refers the reader to recent books and articles on this theme in the supported employment literature with individuals with more severe disabilities. A comparison in approaching supports from this perspective is easy to make.

Common Threads

- Current educational environments do not adequately prepare individuals for the next encountered setting, i.e., school to college, college to work.
- The emphasis of support needs to change from

a focus on fixing a person who is not “measuring up” to providing assistance that is available to all who are deficient in specific areas regardless of what label they have been given.

- Listening to people speak of their experiences is an often neglected component of gathering information about supports. This role of focus groups composed of receivers of supports is a current emphasis of the recent Rehabilitation Act Amendments.
- Informal coping strategies tend to bring about fewer stigmatizing side effects than formally offered assistance by professionals.

Recommended Usefulness for Rehabilitation Professionals:

- Murphy’s comments are thought provoking and intriguing because he offers suggestions for the type of assistance that allows individuals to blend into the work force without the stigmatizing side effects of negative stereotyping from coworkers who tend to focus on the deficits of a person they discover has a label they do not know much about.
- This work is light reading and easy to comprehend by a person with little knowledge in the field of learning disabilities. The stories bring to focus the experiences of a small group of people who comment on the usefulness of the assistance they were offered at different times in their lives.