

WHO ARE THE DISABLED? WHAT IS DISABILITY?

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Why does it seem that we are ever so much more adroit--more sure of ourselves too--at identifying a mentally retarded person than we are in defining exactly what the condition is? So too learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, you name the disability. The most serious question we have isn't the "who" but, rather, the "what" question. It's usually the most serious of all of life's questions. We know who the college students are, the Democrats or Republicans, the Catholics or Jews, Blacks or Whites. If we don't know, we ask them. It's an administrative question, one which the individual has had answered for him--or answers himself. But, what is Catholicism? What does it mean to be Jewish? What is the meaning of mental retardation? Those are at once the most serious questions to ask and the most difficult to answer. Consequently, we should force ourselves not to neglect such questions--force ourselves because people tend to forget or quickly disperse with serious and difficult questions. Why is it relatively easy to "know"? But why is it difficult to know why you "know"? Why do you know that the culturally disadvantaged child with an I.Q. of 70 is (or isn't) mentally retarded, but you can't make the case stick (either way) with those in disagreement? And you can't specify whether the low intelligence is due more to environment than heredity, or that the child will (or won't) get brighter as he matures, or that capability can be modified. We can't say very much that's informative about such a child other than our perceived understanding that he is or isn't mentally retarded. Why is that?

One reason why we haven't improved sufficiently our comprehension of the "what" question is that most courses and textbooks in mental retardation, for example (but also in other areas of exceptionality), offer students compilations of facts structured in predictable packages. What students could better use are the synthesis of these facts in the context of major social-political movements. Further such an understanding could only be helpful in dealing with the "what" question if the student had the benefit of an historical perspective. Possibly nowhere in our work is informed historical analysis needed than in the way we define and classify people and assign effects to causes.

If one wishes to understand mental retardation--or learning disabilities, or emotional disturbance--he shouldn't be confined only to brain cells or I.Q. points, but must examine the context in which the problem occurs. Or, to state it another way, we must pay attention to not only the effects of the teacher and psychologist on children but of the children on the teacher and psychologist.

As a great clinician once remarked to this writer, "there's no presumed intellectual difference between a child with a 75 I.Q. and one with a 76 I.Q. However, if the child with the 75 I.Q. is designated as mentally retarded (because of his score) and the other child isn't (because his score is one point beyond the cutoff), then there is all the difference in the world between them. Just examine how differently each is dealt with."

Today, we don't usually designate children as retarded because of a single I.Q. measure. But we continue to identify and classify people for reasons that are not far removed from the superficial example given above. That is, we continue to act as if the "who" question is the most important one we can ask.

"Who" questions might best be neglected, if not banned entirely. Then we may find that the identification of disabled people would come naturally and inevitably as we increased our understanding of "what" those conditions are.