It is a great honor for me to participate in the 21st conference of the Orton Society. There is no professional group of men and women I respect as much as I respect you. You have been working long and hard, often under adverse and difficult conditions. You have often been unjustly attacked. Public education has been no exception to adding criticism and rejection to your work and findings. However, as this becomes "the age of the learning disability," you are being vindicated in the finest manner. You have pioneered the way for many professionals in various disciplines. You have worked with courage, child-centered conviction, intellectual honesty and forthright purpose. You have not allowed anyone to intimidate or impede you. It is a great privilege for me to share my concerns about children with problems with such a group—professionals who are truly worthy of the title professional. May I encourage you to continue with your tough-minded honesty as you search, with a compassionate heart, for answers to the problems of children with specific language disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my presentation is to discuss with you the experiences I have had in designing and implementing programs in a public school setting for children with unique learning styles. In order to describe these experiences to you, I would like to first establish a rationale for these programs. As far as I am concerned, the size, geographic location, economic status, quantity of staff, or political persuasions of a district are quite secondary to some very basic concepts in education. To me, there is only one thing sacred in education—that is: the child. Materials, methods, facilities, mill rates, staff philosophies, administrative organizations are all subject to change, modification or discard. The one basic thing that remains central is the child. Carl Sandburg said, "There is only one child in all the world and the name of that child is all Children." This child must be our focus—our beginning and end—the alpha and omega of our efforts.

Not only must we have a focus, the child, we must have a goal. Our goal must be to help each child develop a capacity for independent living. If we equip him with the basic tools for learning, this, in turn, will help him to become himself, to develop into an adult who can make maximum contributions to society. This is the major task of education.


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Once again, from my point of view, it is not the size, location or financial condition of school districts that make the difference; it is the focus and the goal of the staff within the school which are the essential components in education. This leads to the third component which I believe to be the school's responsibility in providing programs for children with unique learning styles—that is to say, for all children. This component is basic accountability to society in achieving the goal of helping children develop a capacity for independent living. Far too long schools have blamed society, parents and/or the child for problems which may lie within the educational system itself and its relation to each child. We have been quick to put an environmental causation label on almost anything that we cannot control or explain. I think we have been doing several things:

1) Teaching as dictated by materials instead of by the nature of children.
2) Blaming everyone else but ourselves for children's learning failures.
3) Being prophets of doom rather than teachers of excellence.
4) Focusing on how we fit children to a system rather than fitting a system to a child.
5) Being critics of the negative rather than architects of the positive in children's lives.
6) Trying to predetermine the shape of children's lives rather than equipping them to become what they feel they want to be and must become.
7) Focusing on how children are alike rather than developing an appreciation for their uniqueness.
8) Not having courage to care enough to effect change.

In other words, I think of the present state of education as a Jungle of Confusion rather than a Forest of Learning.

I see:
—trees of curriculum and instruction
—bushes and undergrowth of manuals, units and materials
—vines of new approaches and specific strategies entwined around the trees and bushes
—paths deeply cut so they become 'rut like', leading from one overquoted myth to another; or so overgrown no one, except an adventurer, would try to follow them.
—leaves covering the floor of the forest—leaves of questionnaires, surveys, white papers drawing the public's attention to the problems; but, even as the public becomes concerned with surveys, such as of the high percentage of illiteracy in our country today, educators hardly blink an eye and, lo, another survey falls unnoticed in the scholastic woodland.