

Saving Your Children From Learning-Disabled Educators

The Magic Feather: The Truth About Special Education by William and Lori Granger. E.P. Dutton, 256 pages, \$16.95.

REVIEWED BY SHEILA KOREN

"Special education" is a growth industry, argue Chicago-based journalists Bill and Lori Granger: It fluffs up otherwise declining public school budgets while short-changing an increasing number of students with an inferior and segregated education.

The Grangers would like to see parents of children labeled with "pseudoscientific gobbledegook" diagnoses ("learning-disabled," "dyslexic," "hyperactive," "emotionally disturbed") fight the educational system that so menacingly locates learning problems in children rather than itself.

Like the crow who gave Dumbo the "magic feather" that gave the big-eared little elephant the confidence to fly, the Grangers hope to instill in those being made to feel like failures the confidence that they need to succeed. And they want revenge. Their argument is a compelling one, supported by facts, figures and much common sense. Their anger is justifiable, if not always constructive.

The Grangers were introduced to the subject in a very personal way, as the parents of a child named Alec who, it developed, had an easily correctable vision problem.

They became engaged in a frustrating battle with educators, psychologists, testers and medical folk to prove that their son was not mentally retarded.

Their tales of being invalidated, ridiculed and otherwise demeaned by "helping" professionals would be ludicrously unbelievable or comic in fiction. For example, although they carried a tape of Alec reading to meetings with teachers, administrators and doctors, all refused to listen, assuring the Grangers that their son had tested as hav-

ing no pre-reading skills and therefore could not possibly read.

Another teacher never considered simply telling Alec not to crawl under his desk, so convinced was she that he was exhibiting uncontrollable symptoms of his pathology.

The Grangers depict the special education problem as a creative adaptation to dwindling public school enrollment and budget cuts.

But they seem to have much personal venom for special education teachers whose easily inflated egos, they say, promote discrimination (most special education students are black and male). Often drugs are used. In almost all cases, the children are damaged.

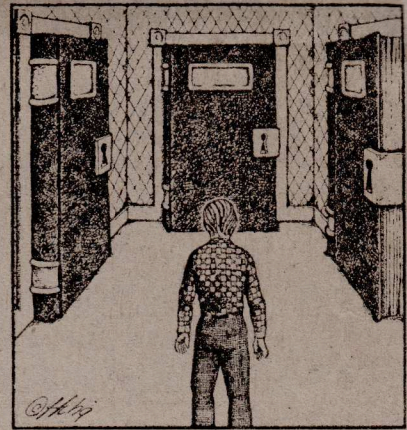
Children develop differently from one another and should be respected and guided in their individuality, say the authors.

The school system uses mainly uninteresting texts and uncreative people.

Many kids' problems are physical and can be remedied, like Alec's. "How mundane," however, they suppose from the special education teacher's view, "to tell someone you teach remedial reading."

How awesome to announce that you do clinical work with minimally brain-dysfunctional children, more dyslexic than dyscalculic, who are benefitting from methyl phenidate."

The authors' concern about the drugging of children is particularly relevant in the current atmosphere



of alleged presidential concern about drug abuse. Rarely considered is the fact that thousands of children are routinely, "heavily and tragically" drugged with an amphetamine called Ritalin for a condition, "minimal brain dysfunction" (i.e., nothing is detected, but we know it's there) that was first introduced by the pharmaceutical company that just happened to have a cure for it.

The Grangers' bitterness about their personal experiences both inspired a courageous and provocative work and also somewhat undermined its value. They resort at times to name calling, and like those they criticize, they are given to labeling (teachers and educators are stupid, lazy, etc.).

For the most part, however, "The Magic Feather" does a much-needed service: It critically examines "those nice programs for poor crippled children" and exposes how they set kids up for failure. Despite the rhetoric about "mainstreaming," most kids stay in special education for their entire school lives and continue to think of themselves as inferior long after that. And all because there's more money available for sick kids than unique ones.

San Francisco writer Sheila Koren is a counseling trainee who recently published the "1987 Fun Days Calendar and Coloring Book."

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