

# The Need for Subject Descriptors in Learning Disabilities Research: Preschool Through High School Years

*National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities*

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Research activities in the area of learning disabilities are extensive. The findings from these studies have influenced funding, program development, education, and treatment for individuals with learning disabilities. Research is based on the use of single subject, within subject, and group comparison models. Across studies there is inconsistency in the description of subjects. There is also inadequate information regarding subject selection and study methodology. These inconsistencies and omissions are of concern to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD). Limited subject de-

scription makes it difficult to interpret and generalize research findings and interferes with replication studies.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a set of descriptors the NJCLD believes are necessary to describe subjects in studies of learning disabilities. Documentation of these descriptors will facilitate replication of research and application of findings by practitioners. This paper will provide guidance to funding agencies, investigators, university programs and other agencies that conduct or supervise research as well as to authors, editors, and publishers who disseminate research findings.

The need for specific subject descriptors in learning disabilities research is based on recognition of the following factors:

- the heterogeneity of learning disabilities necessitates a description of subjects included in a research study;
- many research studies include individuals classified as learning disabled on the basis of state or local service agency criteria, which vary among agencies;
- various procedures are used to determine ability, aptitude, and achievement.

The NJCLD recognizes that there may be problems collecting subject information as a result of factors such as study setting, e.g., school, clinic, hospital. These difficulties can limit the kinds and amount of subject information available. Therefore, the NJCLD recommends that investigators report all relevant facts related to the collection of subject information.

The NJCLD urges all investigators to document the criteria for subject inclusion as well as provide a description of all tests and experimental measures used in the study. To facilitate replication, consistency in research design, and reporting of subject information across studies, the following subject descriptors are recommended:

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Index terms: schools, learning disabilities, research needs, NJCLD, research design, subject descriptors, preschool, school-age, adolescents

## **I. Demographic Data**

Sample size  
Gender  
Socioeconomic status  
Cultural/ethnic background  
Dominant language dialect  
Chronological age  
Race  
Maternal education  
Locale: urban, suburban, rural  
Geographic region

## **II. Health and Medical History**

Medical, including neurological/developmental,  
history  
Sensory system problems

## **III. Education Data**

Grade placement  
Educational history, including current educational setting  
Related services provided  
Curricular and instructional histories

## **IV. Characteristics at the Time of Study**

Sensory and medical status at the time of the study  
Intellectual level  
Behavioral and emotional status  
Receptive and expressive language abilities  
Achievement levels