Executive Summary of
Adolescent Literacy and Older Students with Learning Disabilities

A Report from the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD)*

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NJCLD advocates for effective reading and writing instruction for struggling older students, especially those with learning disabilities (LD). This report describes the adolescent literacy problem (grades 4 to 12), its consequences, and contributing factors. Guiding principles for assessment, instruction, and professional development, as well as recommendations for short-term and future consideration, are addressed.

Literacy is a complex set of skills that includes the interrelated processes of reading and writing required within varied socio-cultural contexts. Reading requires decoding, accurate and fluent word recognition, and comprehension at the word, phrase, sentence, and text levels. Writing requires automatic letter formation and/or keyboarding, accurate and fluent spelling, sentence construction, and the ability to compose a variety of different text structures with coherence and cohesion.

The Problem

Significant numbers of adolescents do not read and/or write at levels sufficient for meeting the demands of the 21st century. Emphasis on early reading and writing alone is insufficient for the ultimate goal of improved literacy for all. A similar investment must be made in reading and writing instruction for older students. Evidence shows that intensive, high-quality literacy instruction can help struggling students acquire the skills they need to succeed in high school and beyond.

The Consequences of Literacy Problems for Adolescents with LD

Students with LD are often inadequately prepared for the academic challenges presented from grade four to post-secondary settings. They often drop out of high school at higher rates than the general population. Low achievement in literacy correlates with high rates of poverty and unemployment. For the older student with LD, opportunity for intervention decreases markedly when the student exits the public school system. Moreover, the 25 fastest growing professions have greater than average literacy demands while the fastest declining professions have lower than average literacy demands.

Contributing Factors

Adolescents with LD often have persistent receptive and expressive oral language deficits that become more pronounced as demands increase in areas such as vocabulary, content specific knowledge, organization and retrieval of semantic information, basic and complex syntax, and higher-order semantic processing. Students with LD often have difficulty maintaining motivation and persistence at the levels necessary for academic success. They may have limited awareness of their individual pattern of strengths and challenges and the remediation and accommodations needed to support their progress.

Students with LD whose native language or culture differs from the language of literacy instruction have additional challenges. It is essential to distinguish between students whose limited linguistic proficiency is due to a language difference from those who have a concomitant LD.

Many adolescents with LD transition to secondary education with under-developed language, literacy, and executive functioning skills, and struggle to meet grade-level expectations. As the demands of the curriculum increase and expectations escalate, gaps in literacy skills between students with and without LD widen; this problem is most extreme for students who have not received services earlier in their educational careers. The primary years serve as a preparatory springboard for higher grade levels when students are expected to think more abstractly and successfully access language-based information and skills requiring increased levels of integration across content areas.

Educational context may contribute to the difficulties faced by adolescents with LD. Traditional school organizational structures may not be designed to accommodate the continuum of instructional services required to adequately address the literacy needs of adolescents with LD.

Guiding Principles for Assessment

Assessment should lead to appropriate instructional planning, *whether or not* an individual student meets eligibility criteria for special education services. Assessment for the older student requires a team-based, comprehensive approach that often necessitates the collection of multiple forms of information, including standardized tests, qualitative analysis of student work samples, observation, and self-report measures. A Response to Intervention (RTI) approach may provide data for the purposes of both instructional planning and eligibility for special education services (NJCLD, 2005). Assessment should be conducted by professionals with expertise in adolescent learning; individualized to address each student's cognitive, academic, social, behavioral, motivational, and/or emotional needs; sensitive to linguistic and cultural factors; and responsive to the student with late-emerging problems.

Guiding Principles for Instruction

Literacy instruction at the middle and secondary levels requires a continuum of services that is differentiated according to the individual learning needs of each student. The principle of universal design addresses this need through the use of inclusive instructional strategies that benefit a broad range of learner characteristics and abilities. Students who continue to struggle—whether with reading or written expression—need targeted instruction at differentiated levels of intensity to address specific difficulties. Some students, particularly those with LD, require sustained and intensive combinations of classroom instruction, remediation, and accommodations that are individualized, explicit, systematic, and relevant.

Guiding Principles for Professional Development

Professional development is pivotal for creating informed learning environments, providing quality instruction, and developing the expertise needed in schools. While special educators and other specialists are primarily responsible for remediation, both general education and special education teachers must be accountable for the development of literacy skills that are critical to the acquisition of content area knowledge.

It is essential that teacher preparation programs include the explicit teaching of what is known about the science of reading and writing so that educators acquire the knowledge and skills critical to effective literacy instruction. The precise design and delivery of ongoing professional development should be differentiated according to professional expertise, experience, and responsibility.

All educators require the knowledge, skills, and attitudes identified as critical for literacy instruction, as well as an understanding of digital literacy and its impact in the general and special education setting. Professionals responsible for assessment, diagnosis, or delivery of remediation require a thorough understanding of language, reading, and writing development and disabilities as well as evidence-based instructional practices.

Recommendations

This NJCLD paper addresses critical issues related to the literacy needs of adolescents with LD and advocates for effective reading and writing instruction for these students. To improve adolescent literacy, key areas requiring attention include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Research initiatives and implementation of best practices
   A. Assessment;
   B. Use of RTI and other alternative approaches for the purposes of identification, instructional planning, and progress monitoring;
   C. Instructional approaches;
   D. Use of universal design to meet print and digital literacy demands;
   E. Learner profiles.
2. Professional development planning and practices
   A. Current science and research-informed practices;
   B. Differentiation based on professional roles and responsibilities.
3. Educational priorities, policies, and practices
   A. Organizational restructuring;
   B. Continuum of services;
   C. Shared responsibility for literacy instruction.