

Learning Disabilities: Implications for Policy Regarding Research and Practice

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It is hard to deconstruct that which is already been so thoroughly deconstructed. Five years, three chairs, no shortage of personal opinions, and perspectives as divergent as the Indian legend of the blind men describing the elephant; only in such a fire can something be forged with so fine an edge.

The paper is essentially divided into sections:

- Points of agreement,**
- Common Misconceptions,**
- Unresolved issues,**
- Basic Principles to Guide Policy,**
- Recommendations.**

Points of agreement:

- Learning Disabilities (LD) are neurobiologically based.**
- LD are a heterogeneous group of disorders.**
- LD involve cognitive processes.**
- LD affect learning.**
- LD persist (in various forms) across the lifespan.**
- Signs of LD (precursors) appear before formal schooling begins.**

Points of agreement:

- LD occur regardless of issues related to environment and nurturance (e.g., culture, socioeconomic status, language, race), but “may differ from one culture or language to another.”
- LD can coexist with other disorders.
- “... deficits of language and communications, in general, are often at the core of LD.”
- The “intellectually gifted may also have LD” and, as a result of their “ability to compensate” are often overlooked “until late in their educational careers.”

Points of agreement:

- **SLD is a disability category, under IDEA, that refers to individuals with a Learning Disability that sufficiently impacts educational performance to justify classification for special education and related services** (approximately half of students found eligible for special education in the United States).
- **Students with LD require “differentiated” support that responds to the severity, pervasiveness, and type of LD experienced.**

Common Misperceptions that create barriers to receiving appropriate services:

- **Individuals with LD are lazy and unmotivated.**
- **LD are mild disabilities. Variations in the functional impact of LD occur because of variations in learning demands, environments, and available supports (e.g., a learning disability affecting sense of direction is mitigated by the existence of maps and GPS).**

Common Misperceptions that create barriers to receiving appropriate services:

- **LD can be cured** (appropriate intervention “can mitigate the negative effects of LD,” but LD can not be “cured;” in the medical sense).
- **LD only affect reading** (“LD also encompass deficits in areas such as listening, speaking, mathematics, written expression, social-emotional, and executive functions”).
- **LD is a term that includes all disabilities that affect learning** (e.g., developmental disabilities, hearing impairments, autism).

Unresolved Issues:

- **The cognitive processes underlying many LD** (e.g., written expression, mathematics, social cognition) **are not well understood.**
- **LD are a variation of normal occurring along a continuum making it difficult to identify a cut point to differentiate individuals with and without a learning disability.**
- **Environmental factors** (e.g., poverty, linguistic diversity) **have effects on learning that are often difficult to distinguish from manifestations of LD.**

Unresolved Issues:

- **Controversy exists regarding the value of the assessment process to determine eligibility for special education services and identifying the existence of LD or effective instructional practices.** (Progress has been made in the development of procedures that help predict the probability of underachievement and inform instruction rather than those that simply rely on the manifestation of “unexpected underachievement” as the “defining characteristic of LD.”)

Unresolved Issues:

- **Prevalence rates of LD range from 5% to 20% and vary from state to state causing confusion and skepticism. The explanation is that the “identification of LD and determination of eligibility for services (SLD) are two distinct concepts that influence reported prevalence rates.”**

Basic Principles to Guide Policy Decisions:

- “Individuals with LD contribute in positive and meaningful ways to the social and economic good.”**
- Individuals with LD are entitled to equal access to instruction, support, standards, practices, and assessments to ensure “meaningful educational progress.”**
- Individuals with LD are entitled to supports in higher education, employment, and across the life span “that enable them to participate in and benefit from education, work, recreation, and other opportunities available to individuals without disabilities.”**

Basic Principles to Guide Policy Decisions:

- Individuals who provide services to those with LD must be provided with effective preservice education and ongoing professional development to be able to competently implement evidence-based practices.**
- Increased participation in statewide assessments results in “increases in the proportion of students meeting achievement standards.”**

Recommendations:

- **Maintain SLD as a distinct eligibility category.**
- **Preserve accountability requirements for students with LD.**
- **Increase coordination between IDEA and ESEA (special ed. and general ed.).**
- **Expand preservice education and fund professional development in the use of evidence-based practices.**
- **Support the implementation of research-based practices that have demonstrated effectiveness and promote the monitoring of student progress.**

Recommendations:

- **Support collaborative research across disciplines on the nature and causes of LD, reliable methods of identification, effective instruction, and appropriate accommodations.**
- **Support expanded research in areas of critical importance in the field of LD, including oral language, listening and reading comprehension, mathematics, written expression, and social-behavioral competence.**

A Not So Hidden Consensus

A shape emerges from the fog to disclose a working construct for learning disability.

- Relative neurobiological weaknesses**
- that are a variation of normal and exist along a continuum**
- that impact the acquisition of functional skills and**
- predict underachievement in the environment where one is expected to perform.**

THANK YOU

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