
LD IDENTIFICATION: IT'S NOT SIMPLY A MATTER OF BUILDING A BETTER MOUSETRAP

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Abstract. Historically, researchers, policy makers, and practitioners have sought improved solutions to the issues associated with LD identification decisions. Since the passage of P.L. 94-142, numerous identification methods has been proposed, implemented, and studied. While each new method has been successful, at least partially, in addressing some of the limitations of earlier methods, each new identification model is saddled with its own set of shortcomings. This article argues that factors beyond specific LD identification technology significantly influence the decision-making process and ultimately decisions about who is and who is not LD. Results from focus group discussions with six stakeholder groups (LD parents, LD teachers, general education teachers, directors of special education, school principals, and school psychologists/diagnosticians) are reported, indicating that a broad array of factors beyond a student's performance on formal and informal assessments influence ultimate decisions made about a student's eligibility for learning disability services. Thus, the search for new identification technologies should also include efforts to better understand the values and biases of critical stakeholders and how to include these factors in the overall decision-making process.

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One commonly ascribed characteristic of students with learning disabilities (LD) is underachievement. That is, students with LD demonstrate learning commensurate with estimates of their abilities in many areas, but in a specific area they show an unexplained deficit. Their deficits in learning or performance on specific tasks (e.g., reading, math calculation and reasoning, oral and written expression, and listening comprehension) are due to a presumed underlying processing delay or dysfunction.

Shortly after P.L. 94-142 was passed in the mid-1970s, the federal government published regulations detailing procedures for how to identify students with LD. The regulations gave states and local districts direction for ways to operationalize the definition of the LD construct. Those regulations indicated that students' level of underachievement could be calculated with a discrepancy formula. Even though the initial severe discrepancy formula published in the regulations was met by strong negative reactions (Hallahan & Mercer,

2002), the U.S. Department of Education stayed with the notion of an aptitude-achievement discrepancy in the regulations but did not specify a particular formula or specific criteria to be used. As a result, by the 1990s, the vast majority of states had adopted underachievement as a critical attribute of LD and an aptitude-achievement discrepancy model as a part of their LD determination framework (Kavale, 2002; Reschly, Hosp, & Schmied, 2003).

Researchers and policy makers have proposed a broad array of discrepancy formulas and criteria as a means of assessing students' underachievement and making accurate LD determination decisions. Proposed formulas have included (a) grade-level deviations whereby an expected grade level score is compared to an actual grade-level score and the discrepancy is calculated from the difference (e.g., Harris, 1971; Selz & Reitan, 1979); (b) expectancy formulas that include some combination of variables such as IQ, chronological age, mental age, years in school, and grade age (e.g., Bond & Tinker, 1973); (c) standard score methods that involve direct comparison between common metrics for intellectual ability and academic achievement (e.g., Elliot 1981; Erickson, 1975); and (d) regression methods in which measurement errors associated with IQ and achievement measures are accounted for (e.g., Reynolds, 1985). Each of these formulations was an attempt to increase the accuracy of decision making about children's school underachievement problems. Additionally, the formulas were attempts to address the shortcomings of previously proposed models (e.g., regression methods were designed to account for statistical effects of regression to the mean in the standard scores approach).

In spite of such repeated attempts to develop more effective procedures for applying the discrepancy paradigm to LD determination decisions, concerns have increased about the viability of these models for LD determination decisions (e.g., Vellutino, Scanlon, & Lyon, 2000). Hallahan and Mercer (2002) summarized four major objections to discrepancy models highlighted by researchers as follows: (a) some of the foundational studies that have been repeatedly cited as the conceptual and research basis of discrepancy paradigms (e.g., Rutter & Yule, 1975) have major flaws in their treatment of the data, leading to inflated results and incorrect conclusions; (b) the Matthew effect (i.e., good readers learn more about their world and hence have inflated IQ scores) may lead to an overestimation of IQ scores for good readers and, conversely, an underestimation of IQ for poor readers (Siegel, 1989); (c) discrepancy models are not sensitive to the learning problems that children in early elementary grades face (Fletcher et al., 1998); and (d) researchers have been unsuccessful in differentiating between students with a

discrepancy from those with low reading achievement but no discrepancy on core behaviors related to reading, such as phonological awareness (Fletcher et al., 1994).

In response to this mounting list of shortcomings in using discrepancy formulas to assess students' underachievement, alternative conceptualizations of underachievement have been examined. Pockets of innovators have emerged in some local and area education agencies focusing on identification approaches that emphasize student responsiveness to well-designed instruction and remediation programs as the major component of their LD identification model (e.g., Grimes & Kurns, 2003; Kovaleski, 2003). The emphasis of these new models has shifted from psychoeducational testing to confirm the presence of critical characteristics (and, hence, pointing to or confirming an LD diagnosis) to an analysis of how well a student responds to instruction on relevant curriculum tasks grounded in research-validated practices. Lack of responsiveness is used as an indicator of a student's underachievement and the presumed underlying learning disability that is limiting achievement.

At the core of responsiveness-to-intervention (RTI) models is the application of high-quality instruction and interventions along with continuous monitoring of student progress. Progress monitoring is important to determine the effectiveness of instructional interventions and the amount of instructional intensity and other adjustments that will be required to ensure student progress (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). The promise that an RTI framework holds for correcting some of the flaws noted in aptitude-achievement discrepancy models is being welcomed with growing optimism (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2002; Gresham, 2002; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

While considerable optimism and hope currently support RTI models as superior alternatives to aptitude-achievement discrepancy formulas, the question must be asked whether the solution to improved LD determination lies with the technology or tool that is used for making disability determination decisions. By technology or tool we mean the identification model or framework that is used to describe students' presenting problems, focus assessment questions and activities, and explain students' performance or behavior. Typically, the identification technologies or tools have been those discussed earlier: a standard score discrepancy model, a regression discrepancy model, an RTI model that is based on a standard intervention protocol – generally favored by researchers – or a problem-solving approach – generally favored by practitioners.

Each of these technologies or tools may be thought of as a "mousetrap," and since the passage of P.L. 94-142, researchers have been trying to build a better

mousetrap – one that will perform in a superior fashion compared to those currently in use. The dimensions of our mousetraps that determine how effective they are vary from the number of false negatives or false positives they produce to the age at which they can effectively be used to make identification decisions. In each instance, researchers and practitioners labor under the assumption that a superior “mousetrap” can be built, believing it is simply a matter of having the right conceptual framework upon which to design the model and the right combination of factors built into the model to gather the right kinds of data under the right conditions. Such a model will have strong technical characteristics and will ultimately identify precisely those students with disabilities who should be targeted for specialized services.

However, some evidence suggests that our field’s unrelenting search for the perfect “mousetrap” for LD determination may be in vain. The challenges surrounding making LD determination decisions involve much more than merely having a well-designed technology or identification model. LD determination decisions are strongly influenced by factors that extend significantly beyond the characteristics typically tapped by identification tools, such as psychometric factors, student answers to items on an assessment instrument, or the degree of a student’s responsiveness to an intervention approach. Some of the factors not measured by existing identification tools that frequently influence LD identification decisions include the availability of other services for students who struggle to learn, the degree of involvement of the student’s parents in the identification process, the student’s ethnicity or SES status, the perceived role of various staff members in a school setting relative to low student achievement, and the degree to which teachers see themselves as being responsible for ensuring the success of certain low-performing students. In other words, while the data that result from applying an identification technology may suggest one decision, factors independent of what is measured may trump what is indicated by the outcome of the tool or technology (e.g., a factor such as strong teacher advocacy for obtaining services to a certain student) (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982). These forces must not only be acknowledged, they must be carefully accounted for when attempting to understand the complete nature of the dynamic surrounding LD identification decision making.

The power of factors beyond the technology or tool used in the decision-making process was underscored in a paper presented by MacMillan and Siperstein (2002) at the LD Summit sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education

Programs in 2002. The authors argued that the marked difference between “research-identified” (RI) LD samples and “school-identified” (SI) LD samples is observed because schools approach eligibility with a different set of concerns than researchers (Bocian, Beebe, MacMillan & Gresham, 1999). That is, teachers are primarily concerned with providing services to the students who are the most difficult to teach and who, in their judgment, are in most need of special assistance. As a result, subjectivity plays a major role in decision making, often overriding any concerns for educational codes, authoritative definitions, or guidelines established by the district’s formally adopted identification technology or tool.

The power of forces beyond the technology was also emphasized in the work of William Reid (1987). Reid argues that the challenges we face in bringing about institutional changes in education may be explained, in part, by understanding the fact that a new tool or technology will only be embraced, and ultimately internalized, if it is understood in relationship to the prevailing culture of the school setting (e.g., the nature of team relationships, team chemistry) and the perceived role of those expected to use the new tool or technology (e.g., what are the prevailing beliefs and values of the key players, what defines the existing context within which the new tool is expected to be used). In short, Reid argues that while supportive policy and an exceedingly well-designed tool or technology are necessary, they are by no means sufficient to bring about improvement in school practices. Rather, a vital component is to also understand and address the perceived roles of key stakeholders (i.e., what role they see themselves playing; for example, if a fifth-grade teacher sees himself as being responsible for teaching critical subject-matter content, he may balk at the idea of having to take regular progress measures required by the new LD identification RTI tool) and the type of culture within the school – whether it supports or presents barriers to new innovations.

Our hypothesis is that “street-level workers” (e.g., general education staffs of building principals and teachers; special education staffs of directors of special education, LD teachers, school psychologists, psychometricians, and diagnosticians; and parents) have a different conceptualization of LD determination issues that are not technical, but reflect organizational and resource constraints (Lipsky, 1980). That is, LD determination is more influenced by local efforts and problem solving than the relevant federal or state regulations. Unless these factors and the dynamics Reid addressed are taken into account, the likelihood is very small that any innovation such as a new LD identification technology will be firmly embraced and implemented with fidelity. In short, our search for improved

Table 1
Focus Group Participation

Stakeholder Group	LA	MN	MO	Total
Special education directors	3	7	6	16
Principals	6	7	7	20
Parents	2	4	9	15
General education teachers	6	7	6	19
LD teachers	4	7	9	20
School psychologists/diagnosticians	8	7	8	23

Note. N = 113.

tools for identifying students with LD must be expanded to include an understanding of the contexts within which the new tools will be embedded and the perceived roles of the professional who will be using them, as well as the opinions of other stakeholders who will be affected by the adoption and application of the new tools.

The purpose of this article is to present data from a focus group study that involved six stakeholder groups who influence and are influenced by LD identification processes: parents of LD children, school principals, general education teachers, LD teachers, school psychologists, and directors of special education. The data underscore the importance of carefully considering factors in addition to those embodied within the actual LD identification tool.

METHODS

Participants

Our sampling plan encompassed two levels: state and stakeholder group representation. Segmented samples (states and stakeholder groups) were chosen to represent diversity along dimensions relevant to LD determination at the school building level. We assumed that stakeholders within a group were homogeneous in terms of role definition, but the roles performed by the six stakeholder groups generally varied depending on their function(s) relative to LD determination. These different functions were assumed to vary according to

how directly the stakeholder was involved in the decision on LD determination. For example, administrative roles such as a director of special education tended to be more homogeneous across states and school districts than the role of psychologists and diagnosticians, who were involved in student-level decision making.

State-level sampling. The focus groups were conducted in three states: Minnesota, Missouri, and Louisiana. Part of the consideration in requesting participation by these states was that they differed in the LD eligibility models they used, and thus represented a diversity of practices as well as variability in terms of the students who might be considered as having a learning disability. For example, in Minnesota a major metropolitan school district incorporates curriculum-based measurement in the LD determination process and was one of the first locations to seek a waiver from the federal LD determination regulations. Louisiana is the only state that has adopted an achievement-achievement discrepancy model in evaluating the severity of students' underachievement. Some Missouri school districts, on the other hand, incorporate district-level evaluation teams rather than school-based teams. These variations in practice provided an opportunity to investigate if and how beliefs and roles differed among staff and parents under differing organizational structures and resource constraints.

Participant-level sampling. To investigate the perspectives of stakeholders in school-based LD determi-

nation decisions, six groups were identified who are typically centrally involved in LD assessment, determination, and service-delivery decisions. Table 1 provides a summary of the number of participants in each group by state. The stakeholder groups included:

1. Directors of special education – because of their influence in the determination and monitoring of district-level policies, hiring special education staff, directing staff development activities, allocating resources, and integrating services across schools.
2. Building-level principals – because of their administrative involvement in the referral, evaluation, and disability determination process at the student and building level. They are also involved in the staffing, supervision, and evaluation of classroom teachers and itinerant staff within the building. Principals are building-level implementers of school district policies and also considered as the instructional leaders involved in the adoption and implementation of reforms in curriculum and instruction. Building principals play a central role in determining how students who experience difficulties will be viewed within a school and how resources will be allocated to address students' needs. They also play an important role in interfacing with parents. Building principals typically know about children from the perspectives offered by others, including classroom teachers and parents.
3. Parents of students with LD – because of their advocacy roles for their children and representing their child in the due process and legal protections of federal, state, and local district policies. Parents are provided a means for challenging school district policies and actions through administrative and judicial hearings. Parents are outside the school system and may be considered as the schools' customers. Parents know how their children perform and behave in environments apart from schools such as home, neighborhood, and larger community settings.
4. General education teachers – because they frequently play a central role in determining which students are referred for disability determination evaluations. Within the classroom they are the "street-level workers" who can make comparisons of students within their classroom, other children within the school, and – from an historical perspective – other children with whom they have interacted across time. The teacher's relationship with the child is the core of the educational system and "a kind of center of gravity, around which the resources and interactions of a healthy

educational system revolve like the planets about the sun" (Greer, 1989, p. 294). Teacher roles include members of a school's team of educators who implement federal, state, and district policies and directives about services for children and curriculum and instruction.

5. Learning disability teachers – because they provide the specially designed services to students identified as LD – sometimes directly and at other times through consultative services to parents and general education teachers. These teachers are often viewed as important resources for improving a student's performance within the general education classroom. In the LD determination process, they have a mandated role to participate in students' evaluation and in comparing students' evaluation data to criteria of the federal, state and/or district LD identification model.
6. Diagnosticians – because their role provides a broader normative interpretation of student behavior based on standardized, normative assessments and informal measures. They are considered important to providing a different framework for describing and interpreting student behavior. Diagnosticians included school psychologists and psychometricians. Diagnosticians frequently function in an itinerant capacity across several schools rather than being based at a particular school. They have a mandated role in participating in student evaluations and comparing each student's evaluation data to criteria of the federal, state and district LD identification model.

Participant recruitment. Within each state, a liaison was identified to help facilitate the organizational activities for the focus groups. In two states, a state department of education staff member coordinated these activities. In the third state, a local director of special education served as the liaison to project staff. Organizational activities included locating and scheduling meeting facilities, recruiting participants for the stakeholder groups, and providing communication between project staff and the participants.

The liaison was asked to identify six to eight participants for each of the stakeholder groups and invite their participation. Project staff recommended several considerations for participant recruitment, including (a) high familiarity with the state's LD identification and determination process, (b) availability to meet with the focus groups at least three times, (c) at least two years of experience in their current position, and (d) representation of districts with large, medium, and small student enrollments. Among teaching and administrative staffs, we sought a higher representation of elementary schools (four staff members) than middle

schools (one or two staff members) or high schools (one or two staff members). For the parent group, we sought to include parents for whom the child's determination decision was LD and those for whom the child's determination decision was non-LD, wanting views from both types of parents.

Participant preparation. Project staff prepared an introductory letter inviting the recruits to participate in the focus group activities. Activities were described as three 90-minute meetings that would include other individuals holding the same role. Accompanying the letter were preparatory materials: a draft agenda and a journal article, an abridged version of a National Center on Learning Disabilities (May, 2002) paper

entitled "Maintaining Rights – Achieving Better Outcomes: Identifying and Serving Students with Learning Disabilities." This article was intended to provide background information about national issues surrounding LD identification practices and to help participants review their local practices within the broader context of the national debate relative to LD determination issues.

Procedures

Pilot test. Educational staff from a local school district met with project staff as a pilot test of the procedures and materials to ensure that time estimates, pacing, question sequence, and wording were appropriate. In this pilot the group included nine staff: building admin-

Figure 1. Guiding questions on current practices for school and district personnel.

IDEA reauthorization and accompanying regulatory changes are looming, which provides an opportunity for positive changes regarding the identification of children with specific learning disabilities (LD). As a result of your participation, you will be shaping services to students, and contributing to research and policy in this vitally important area. The first discussion focuses on your beliefs, perspectives, and opinions regarding your local LD determination process.

1. Different individuals hold various opinions regarding the purpose and/or value of special education. We want to understand some of those perspectives.
 - a. Nationally, over one half of the students identified with disabilities have a learning disability and states' prevalence rates vary from 3% (lowest) to over 9% (highest).
What contributes to variations in practices across schools and within your district?
 - b. What is the value in distinguishing a student with a disability from a student who is experiencing academic difficulties?
2. Given that our goal is to make accurate LD decisions, we are curious about how that determination process currently looks within your school/district.
 - a. What happens in your LD determination process?
 - b. What role do you play in the LD determination process?
 - c. Within the LD determination process, who takes the leadership role?
 - d. Who holds the team accountable to your state's guidelines?
 - e. How does your LD determination team problem solve and handle disagreements that arise?
 - f. The aptitude-achievement discrepancy component is often criticized in LD determination. What does it add to the LD determination process? What do you consider its strengths and weaknesses?
3. LD determination is generally recognized as difficult and intensive; we are curious about diagnostic distinctions.
 - a. How do students with LD differ from the many other students needing help?
 - b. What's your sense of the importance of this distinction?
 - c. Identifying the learning disability and a student's need for services are both parts of special education eligibility. Does one of these (that is, verifying that a student does indeed evidence LD characteristics or that the student is simply in need services) have more weight than the other?
 - d. What contributes to a high level of confidence in accurate LD determination?

Figure 2. Guiding questions on current practices for parents.

IDEA reauthorization and accompanying regulatory changes are looming. The reauthorization provides a real opportunity for positive changes with regard to the identification of children with specific learning disabilities (LD). We value your perspective on some issues pertaining to LD determination. Parents such as yourself hold the key to understanding what practices best serve your children. As a result of your participation, you will ultimately be shaping services to students and contributing to research and policy in this vitally important area. The first discussion will focus on your beliefs and opinions regarding your local LD determination process.

1. Schools must balance: (a) their state's LD determination criteria and (b) providing services to many students experiencing difficulty. Often struggles exist for the LD team in determining student eligibility.
 - a. What is the value in distinguishing a student with a disability from a student who is experiencing academic difficulties?
 - b. Knowing that IDEA reauthorization is occurring, what are some of the current issues from your perspective?
 - c. Under the current LD determination model, what works well?
 - d. How important is "accuracy" of LD determination? What's more important than accuracy?
2. These questions focus on your involvement with the determination process used by your school/district.
 - a. What has been the degree/level of your involvement?
 - b. Did you or the school initiate the LD determination? Who provides families with information regarding services available for students with special needs?
 - c. Do you agree with the decisions that have been made regarding your child's eligibility? Why? Why not?
 - d. What additional data, information, or evidence should have been analyzed and discussed?
 - e. What frustrations or obstacles have you encountered with the process?
 - f. What would you change in order to make the system more practical?
3. These questions focus on issues beyond your school and district.
 - a. How do you believe the federal government influences what occurs in local special education?
 - b. What is your assessment of the level of training that teachers and special education providers receive?
 - c. What skills or knowledge need to be further developed?

istrators ($n = 2$), special education teachers ($n = 2$), general education teachers ($n = 2$), school psychologists ($n = 2$) and one special education supervisor. Based on the results of the pilot, staff rephrased several focus group questions and demographic questionnaire items.

Focus group sessions. Each of the six stakeholder groups met separately with the hope that participants would feel comfortable speaking openly with their peers. Mixing the stakeholder groups might have resulted in feelings of intimidation by some members as a result of their administrative relationships (e.g., directors of special education and LD teachers or building administrators and general education teachers) or feelings of animosity (e.g., parents and school personnel or general educators and special educators).

The focus group began with introductions by project staff and instructions for how to complete the consent forms and demographics questionnaire. Project staff conducted all focus groups.

Each session followed a set agenda with questions addressing topics focused on current issues and local practices of LD determination. The goal was to build a theory for understanding current practices and beliefs regarding LD determination current practices and the value of such efforts. Figure 1 lists the questions used with school personnel. Figure 2 includes the questions guiding the focus group with parents. In addition to the discussion, an elicitation activity was also included; namely, all participants were asked to identify the attributes or characteristics that they considered im-

portant in selecting an LD determination model. Participants recorded these characteristics as responses on a written survey.

Analysis

An analysis process was undertaken to ensure the accuracy of the data collected and the way themes were identified and cross-validated. Each focus group meeting was attended by at least two project researchers. All sessions were videotaped, and each researcher kept notes of meeting transactions. Following the focus group session, transcripts of each focus group meeting were created. Additionally, the notes and observational comments of each researcher were transcribed and organized in relation to the verbatim transcripts.

The focus group questions (see Figures 1 and 2) were used as an organizational framework for analyses. Project staff members independently reviewed transcripts of all sessions in order to identify similarities, contrasts, and themes within and between the group discussions. When each researcher concluded his/her individual review of the materials, the following process was used to compare conclusions, identify themes, and resolve differences by returning to the original data set. During extended face-to-face meetings, project staff member presented the themes that they independently identified. Each of the possible themes was discussed and refined by clarifying each person's notes and perspectives of the information shared in each of the focus group sessions.

RESULTS

The results are presented as a synthesis of the focus group meetings across the three states and six participating groups. In general, the differences between the states were minimal in this level of analysis, whereas the differences between the six groups were greater. The results are presented in two parts: Emerging Themes and Desired LD Model Attributes.

Emerging Themes

As each of the six focus groups addressed their respective questions listed in Figures 1 and 2, a pattern of responses emerged suggesting four dominant themes.

Theme 1: Variations in LD determination procedures. A dominant theme in all focus group meetings was how the vagaries in current LD determination models could easily lead to variations in how LD identification practices were operationalized from district to district (and even school to school). That is, local implementations of the LD guidelines allowed school staffs a great deal of latitude in the assessment process even while maintaining sufficient alignment with the state's guidelines. This lack of specificity allows school personnel to use the LD category as a

mechanism to provide services to students needing assistance and likely to benefit from the interventions provided in LD services. In addition, since LD programs are generally monitored on the basis of caseload size rather than the characteristics of students served, the number of students receiving LD services was considered a more limiting factor in LD determination than the unique characteristics of the students. In short, resource availability was seen as having a greater influence on students identified than the degree to which students were considered as having an actual disability.

In federal and state guidelines, disability determination is presented as a two-part test: (a) Does the child have a disability? and (b) Does the child need special education services? Across the stakeholder groups, the latter part of this test received far greater focus than the former. This perspective suggests that the objectivity of the LD determination is compromised or, at least stretched to include students who may not pass the first test of actually having a disability in order to provide services to students who are in need of some kind of assistance.

Participants' comments emphasized values about responding to students' need for improved performance, more classroom success, and better social integration. These values also underscored a tension among staff members with primary responsibilities for LD assessment and determination versus staff members with primary responsibility for instruction. Specifically, instructional staff could more readily justify reasons for students needing and potentially benefiting from specialized instruction than justify why a student should receive specialized services based on the student *actually* having a learning disability. In some settings, to address these tensions between staff members with assessment and instructional responsibilities, district-wide rather than school-based evaluation teams were used. Under this configuration, student referrals were received at a district level and a multidisciplinary team would be assigned to complete the child's evaluation. This alternative assessment model was intended to reduce the stresses and inequities that the district believed existed at a school level and to make better use of their evaluation staff.

From the perspective of many parents, student eligibility determination did not follow an explicit model. That is, many parents were uncertain about the particulars of disability determination but reasoned that the services were available for students who, like their own, needed assistance.

A troubling observation surfaced in the parent focus groups about the role of parents in the schools. The level of involvement of parents in the school was asso-

ciated with the ease with which their children received services and the characteristics of those services. Several examples surfaced of parents who worked directly for the school districts or in volunteer capacities and reported fewer difficulties with their children accessing services and higher satisfaction with the services, whereas parents who did not have ready access to school personnel and a level of familiarity with school staff members voiced less satisfaction with the services their children received.

On the other hand, parents described the LD services that their children ultimately received as the best instructional options for their children. The parents expressed less concerns about the disability determination process and much more about the variations in the quality and amount of services that their children received. Thus, the contentious issues were not about disability determination but about how the school district would intervene in response to student needs. Parents most frequently expressed concern that the services were too limited and that transitions across grades and especially schools were not smooth or integrated. One parent likened the IEP process to a jousting contest, noting that she needed a suit of armor to go into battle with school staff members.

Theme 2: Competing views on maintaining the LD category. Considerable differences were noted relative to how strongly the various stakeholders felt about maintaining the LD category. Several directors of special education and, surprisingly, a sizeable number of LD teachers questioned the value of maintaining the LD category considering the uncertainty surrounding it and the large number of needs that exist among other students in their building who are not classified as LD. Thus, in light of how loosely defined the LD category is and how arbitrary decisions about services often are, several participants argued that the category should be eliminated and the resources currently designated for LD made available to schools for addressing the needs of a broader segment of the student body who are not benefiting from general education. One elementary principal said: "If I only had access to the funds that go to serving special education students and the flexibility to use those funds for all students in my school who are struggling with learning, we would be able to help many more students than just the select few with disabilities."

Concerns about the integrity of the LD category were also evident in LD assessment practices. In general, assessment staff members were more confident in their assessment of students relative to classroom curriculum issues than in their assessment of constructs historically associated with LD determination (e.g., psychological and informational processing deficits,

aptitude-achievement discrepancy, exclusion-clause components, and cognitive abilities). Concerns were voiced about the perception that many of the students served in the LD category demonstrate few characteristics that distinguish them from the lowest achieving students in their schools. This lack of distinction was especially troubling when special education interventions seemed geared toward general education achievement and outcomes. That is, participants argued that if student goals are almost always expressed relative to the general education classroom, what is the point of making further distinctions, such as presuming a neurological or psychological processing deficit?

Theme 3: Professional role ambiguity. Related to the issue of integrity of the LD category was the uncertainty surrounding the tasks of professionals who worked with students with LD. For example, one of the LD teachers commented that she did not feel as if she had ever had a "true" LD student on her caseload. The LD instructors commented that they were often asked to support students in the general education curriculum – largely through tutorial support to ensure that students completed assignments from the general education classroom – which might have been at the expense of using alternative curricula or providing specially designed instruction. Some LD instructors were comfortable in the role of general educational support, but others noted that the uniqueness of LD as a construct, especially as one considers significant underlying information-processing deficits, was not being addressed under current instructional configurations.

For instructors who viewed students with LD as a unique subset of learners, a differentiated curriculum and unique instructional methods were seen as foundational to addressing their needs. These competing agendas contributed to a lack of role clarity and confusion, and often led to strained relationships among building staff members. A lack of clarity of teacher roles, especially for LD teachers, caused some to question whether specialized services on behalf of students with LD were truly available in their school. These concerns ultimately influenced decision-making practices regarding at-risk learners. An LD teacher lamented,

"I've been in this field for 12 years now. I'm really confused on what my director expects of me. At times I feel as if my legitimacy as a professional is really questioned because of the kinds of tasks I'm expected to do. I often get the feeling I'm a 'short-order' cook. That is, anything that the general teacher needs in teaching the student with LD, I try to provide. Most of the things I do generally have very little to do with specialized instruction."

A slightly different dynamic characterized the per-

spectives of general education teachers relative to their work with students with LD. Specifically, some of these teachers expressed feelings of being intimidated when

they were asked to participate in teaming relationships to serve to students with LD. They reported sometimes feeling inadequate in being able to meaningfully part-

Table 2

Louisiana, Minnesota, and Missouri Stakeholder Attributes: "On What Characteristics Would You Evaluate a New LD Determination Model?"

Category	Attributes
National standards and criteria	Consistent from state to state
Efficient process	Short time from screening to IEP development; easy to use; practical; reduces paperwork
Definite criteria	Defined evaluation procedures; less subjective, more objective criteria; more black-and-white, technical process; data-driven process
Valid, research-based	Specificity and sensitivity; effectiveness; differentiation between LD/slow learner/at-risk; research-based
Reliability	Yields consistent decisions for students
Implementation cost	Expenses within reason
Age/developmentally appropriate	Addresses all grade levels so children are not overlooked
Early identification	Leading to early intervention
Curriculum-based measures	Curriculum-based measures of student performance
Outcome focus	Data that prove students are learning
Informative	Informs parents, child, and teachers
IEP development	Data useful for IEP development; prescriptive; assists with "Where do we go from here?"
General education accountability	Students exposed to high-quality, research-based general education instruction prior to special education referral; relevant to what is happening in the classroom
Parent participation	Active parent participation and partnering
Child-centered	Focused on the individual child and his/her needs; stresses student needs more than the student label
Re-evaluation	Diminished or eliminated importance of re-evaluation
Information processing	Specific thought processes or learning styles, including cognitive levels; processing
Cognitive ability assessment	Average to above-average; would include students with above-average ability; students with IQ in 70s and 80s considered
Adaptable	Meets the needs of a changing population of struggling learners
Aptitude-achievement discrepancy	No regression formula
Verbal and performance IQ	In part uses discrepancy between verbal and performance on IQ test
Rule-out	Includes the exclusion clause; "rule out" of lack of opportunities, environmental influences, and cultural differences

Table 3

LD Model Attributes for Six Stakeholder Groups Ranked by Importance

Percentage Rank	Attribute
Rated by \geq of all 6 groups	Early identification Child-centered General education accountability
Rated by \geq 50% of all 6 groups	Early identification Child-centered
Rated by \geq 50% of 4/6 groups	Efficient process Valid, research-based Age/developmentally appropriate

ner with teachers who had special preparation and background about serving students with LD. Additionally, most general education teachers reported feeling increased pressures to teach all of the state-required subject-matter content (science, social studies, etc.), voicing concerns about assuming additional responsibilities relative to specialized skill instruction and associated progress monitoring.

Theme 4: Varying perspectives on the value of IDEA procedures and regulations. Views on the value of IDEA varied significantly among the groups. In general, school personnel viewed IDEA as an important framework that directs assessment and service delivery activities. But in some ways, the IDEA framework was viewed as burdensome because of its prescriptive characteristics, heavy paperwork requirements, and potentially punitive consequences. Interesting, no concerns were expressed about state department monitoring of LD determination procedures, decisions or service-delivery options, but concerns about the procedural requirements (e.g., timelines followed, required signatures, reviews completed as scheduled) were repeatedly voiced. The greatest concerns raised by school-based stakeholders about IDEA related to the energy required to respond to initiatives by parents who could engage districts in due process hearings and legal actions. Those concerns were seen as a major influence on district decision making and school actions relative to students who were struggling to meet academic standards.

Most parents expressed support for IDEA as the only

protection they had to ensure that their children received needed services. Generally, parents looked to the IDEA procedural safeguards as the basis for their advocacy. Some of the members of the parent focus groups were also school district employees (e.g., teacher, central office staff) or school volunteers. Each of these individuals reported a much more favorable view of how responsive schools were in meeting the needs of their children through special education services. However, many of the parents who did not have a close association or relationship with the school or district reported considerable dissatisfaction with how their children's needs were met through IDEA provisions. These parents generally described schools as using IDEA regulations to limit services and to protect themselves from legal liabilities.

An example of these differing views was particularly evident in the discussion about IEPs. Parents typically viewed the IEP as an administrative step not tied to the quality of services provided to their son or daughter or meaningfully directing instruction. In other words, they saw IEPs as a safeguard schools used to protect themselves and less as a way to ensure that appropriate interventions and supports were identified and provided to meet the unique needs of their children. School personnel, on the other hand, typically emphasized that the IEP was an important tool for communicating with parents their understanding of the child's current performance and the plan designed for addressing a child's unique needs.

Desired Attributes of LD Identification Model

All stakeholder groups were asked to indicate the attributes that they considered to be most important for choosing an ideal model for making LD identification decisions. A scenario was presented to each of the focus groups that as a result of reauthorization of IDEA, the regulations governing LD determination decisions were likely to change. Thus, they were asked what factors they would most value in the new LD identification model to be included within the newly reauthorized IDEA.

The goal was to elicit key descriptors or attributes that would characterize the ideal model. The activity was presented as two paper-pencil tasks. In the first task, participants were given an open-response format and asked to list "the attributes on which you would evaluate a new model." From the more than 50 responses, project staff identified 22 categories as shown in Table 2. On the second task, stakeholder participants were asked to select what they considered to be the 10 most important attributes.

Table 3 lists the most frequently selected attributes by all the participants as desirable for an LD determination model. As illustrated, participants indicated that a preferred model would emphasize early identification, child-centered evaluations, and general education accountability. At least 50% of the participants in all focus groups emphasized the importance of two other attributes – early identification and child-centered. In four of the six groups, at least 50% of the participants indicated that (a) an efficient process, (b) a valid, research-based process, and (c) an age- or developmen-

tally appropriate process were important attributes for a model.

In Table 4, the most frequently selected attribute(s) are presented by stakeholder group. As illustrated, general education teachers (84%) and building principals (87%) identified efficiency of the assessment process as most important. The special education directors (8%) wanted a model with demonstrated validity and research support. All of the LD teacher participants (100%) noted that early identification was an important attribute. LD teachers were the only group in which all members agreed on an attribute. Finally, parents also valued early identification and a child-centered approach to the LD determination.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Stakeholders ($N = 113$) from three states representing educators, administrators, and parents engaged in extended discussions on questions related to LD determination policies and practices. Discussions focused on participants' experiences with current local implementation practices, the varied roles that stakeholders played in the process, and what they considered to be critical factors to embody within new LD identification models. Thus, this study was designed to better describe current practices from the perspectives of those persons centrally involved in student LD determination and ways to improve upon existing practice.

The information that emerged supports much of the research conducted by MacMillan and his colleagues (2002), who repeatedly found that teachers are primarily driven by a motivation to provide quality services

Table 4
Most Desired Attribute by Stakeholder Group

Stakeholder Group	Attribute	Percentage
General education teachers	Efficient process	84%
Special education directors	Valid, research-based	81%
LD teachers	Early identification	100%
School psychologists	General education accountability	94%
Parents	Early identification and child-centered	71%
Principals	Child-centered and efficient process	87%

to students who need services the most. Hence, addressing classroom needs (rather than the objectivity that is at the cornerstone of most LD identification models) appears to play a major role in the decision-making process, often overriding concerns about following district or state guidelines relative to LD determination.

Additionally, the focus group data clearly underscore the fact that factors that are not accounted for in LD identification tools strongly influence identification decision making. Variables such degree of parental involvement, familiarity of parents with school personnel, availability of other services for at-risk students, perceived competence of site teachers, degree to which teachers feel a personal sense of responsibility for the academic progress of at-risk learners all emerged as factors influencing how various stakeholders think about and make decisions regarding struggling learners.

In short, the data suggest that when confronted with the two-part test for disability determination specified by federal and state guidelines (i.e., Does the child have a disability? and Does the child need special education services?), stakeholders appear to be much more concerned about getting services to children who need services than ensuring that they are getting the classification decision right about whether or not the student actually has a disability.

In spite of limitations in sample size and lack of random sampling of participants, the results of this study suggest that powerful forces beyond the LD determination model or technology exert significant pressures and influences on the decision-making process. Reid's (1987) theory of factors that influence institutional adoption and implementation of district practices seems to be a viable framework for understanding the complex dynamics that operate within school or district social structure. The assignment of school personnel to implement LD identification practices clearly seems to be influenced by the prevailing cultures, values, power relationships, perceived roles (of self and others), and so on. In short, having a well-designed technology – in this case a strong LD identification model – and supportive institutional policies to facilitate implementation, Reid's core argument, is necessary but by no means sufficient to bring about improvement in school practices appears to be correct relative to the challenges the LD field has historically faced in developing and validating LD determination models. The necessity of also understanding and carefully addressing the perceived roles and values of key stakeholders and the type of culture and social dynamic within which they operate is central to successfully implementing any LD identification model.

While our search for an improved LD identification “mousetrap” must continue, commensurate energy should be directed to understanding the contextual variables that play a significant role in shaping and influencing how the technology is ultimately implemented. To the degree that we better understand the role that the broad array of non-technology factors play, the more effective we will be in bringing any LD identification model to scale. In all likelihood, scalability will be influenced as much by the non-technology factors as the defining characteristics and features of the new identification model.

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NOTES

As used in this article “mousetrap” connotes a new or improved product for solving a complex problem or dilemma. In no way are the authors implying that children with LD are mice or that the goal of producing an improved LD identification procedure is to permanently entrap children so they cannot escape the label or services that would result from being identified as having a learning disability.

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