

## CURRENT PRACTICES AND OBSTACLES

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*This study investigated the assessment practices used by resource room teachers in Jordan to determine eligibility for learning disability, and to identify assessment obstacles. The study also investigated whether assessment practices and obstacles of assessment differ among resource room teachers as a function of gender and academic qualification. 150 resource room teachers were randomly selected out of 455 to complete a survey designed to serve the purpose of the study. Results indicated that most teachers rely heavily on teacher-made tests of academic achievement to make eligibility decisions. Curriculum based assessment; students' response to intervention (RTI) and dynamic assessment were found to be the least practices used by teachers. With regard to assessment obstacles, results revealed that one of the major obstacles to assessment were high rate of referral especially for low achievers. Results also indicated statistically significant differences in assessment practices for teachers' qualification but not for teacher's gender. Concerning the obstacles faced by teachers both variables showed no significant differences. Implications of these findings for assessment practices and for future research in Jordan are provided.*

### *Introduction*

There is a great amount of published research on the topic of assessment and decision making regarding students with Learning Disabilities (LD) worldwide. This research intends to highlight a framework for determining eligibility of students with learning disabilities and raises questions about the credibility of such decision making processes (Ysseldyke, 2005; Fletcher, Denton & Francis, 2005; Dean & Burns, 2002).

Based on a review of twenty years of research in the field of assessment and decision making for learning disabilities, Ysseldyke (2005) concluded the following sources of problems regarding the performance of the assessment function to identify and serve students with learning disabilities: (a) the inconsistency of decisions made by special education teams in the field of learning disability, (b) the fact that most decisions were based on students' characteristics rather than data-based assessment, (c) the declaration of many low achieving students as LD students, and (d) the absence of adequate measures for psychological process and abilities despite the availability of adequate norm-referenced tests.

One source of this uncertainty might be the use of different criteria for determining the eligibility of LD students. The most widely used criteria for eligibility determination are the ability/achievement discrepancies, and response to intervention (RTI), which were recently adopted by the new Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (IDEA) in the United States. The discrepancy criteria dominated the assessment and identification of LD students for many years. Nevertheless, the validity of the discrepancy criteria has been questioned (Cone, Wilson, Bradley, & Reese, 1985; Gresham, 2002; Gresham et al., 1996; MacMillan & Siperstein, 2002; Is this 2001? If not missing reference Shepard & Smith, 1983; Wilson, 1985, and Peterson and Shinn, 2002).

Recent scholars like Shinn (2007) defended the use of alternative approaches to identify LD students. He presented the RTI process within a larger problem-solving framework as an alternative for eligibility decisions of LD students.

However, in his article, Ysseldyke (2005) speculated an emerging condition called *Resistance of RTI*, and many questions have been raised about the newly adapted criteria of decision making. Research has to find answers for frequent questions raised by researchers, such as: how bad does the response have to be to qualify for the LD label? And is RTI stable over time? Therefore, the law (IDEA act, 2004) gave the freedom of choice for the use of either method to make eligibility decisions under the category of Specific Learning Disability (SLD).

It is now clear that there is still much controversy over the criteria used in determining eligibility for LD students in the developed countries. What would be the case in developing countries where the provision of services for LD students is just at the beginning stage?

Over the past years, the Ministry of Education in Jordan has played an important role through the Directorate of Special Education in supporting students with learning disabilities by providing these students with remedial and special education services. These services are provided through resource rooms, which were initially established in the early nineties.

These resource rooms are located within some public schools- less than 10% of all public schools- and are supposedly equipped with the necessary equipment. Usually, the resource rooms provide special education services to 20 students, using the pull out model, that is a student is pulled out from his or her regular class for a period of time, varying from one to three class period(s) each day. Basically, the resource room teacher assesses students who are referred by classroom teachers to resource rooms for eligibility. These resource room teachers are also the sole providers of special education services. Unlike other countries where such decisions are made by a multi disciplinary team, where psychologists play a major role in the assessment of students with learning disability, resource room teachers in Jordan are responsible to make eligibility decisions of learning disability and provide educational services (Al-Natour, 2008). These teachers are either holders of a community college diploma in learning disabilities, or a bachelor's degree in special education. Eligible students for learning disability receive instruction in the Arabic language and mathematics in small group format or individualized instruction.

For several years, two researchers of this study supervised practicum training of student teachers majoring in special education at the university of Jordan , when they visited resource rooms, which hosted student teachers. Both researchers noticed variability among resource room teachers in making eligibility decisions regarding students with learning disabilities and the lack of tools for making such eligibility decisions. These practices of eligibility and assessment have been questioned due to the absence of national guidelines for assessment, lack of formal assessment tools and variability of competencies of resource room teachers to carry out such decisions (McBride, 2007).

These observations set the groundwork for formulating research questions. The intention was to examine assessment practices and obstacles facing resource room teachers from their point of view.

There is no doubt that these areas of problems exist in the case of Jordan. The questions that remain are: what are the actual specific assessment practices most widely used and what are the most pressing obstacles facing the Jordanian professionals. To this end, the study hopes to explicate the implications of assessment practices and the associated obstacles on the provision of quality education to students with learning disabilities in Jordan

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to examine current practices used to determine eligibility for special education services for students with learning disability in Jordan, and to report obstacles to assessing students with learning disabilities from the perspective of resource room teachers.

#### *Research Questions:*

This study attempted to answer the following questions:

- 1- What are the main assessment practices used by resource room teachers to determine eligibility for learning disabilities?
- 2- What are the obstacles encountered by resource room teachers to determine eligibility for learning disabilities?
- 3- Do resource room teachers' assessment practices differ due to teacher's gender, and academic qualification?
- 4- Do assessment obstacles encountered by resource room teachers differ due to the teacher's gender, academic qualification?

#### **Method**

##### *Design*

A survey research method was used to investigate the research problem formulated in this study. The independent variables were represented by teachers' gender, degree, teaching experience, and academic qualification. Practices of diagnosis and assessment of learning disabilities and the rating of obstacles faced in the diagnosis and assessment procedures represented the dependent variables.

##### *Participants:*

A randomly selected sample of 150 resource room teachers from a total population of 455 resource room teachers from both public and private sectors located in 34 directorates spread all around the

kingdom of Jordan from north to south. Amman the capital had the biggest population. of subjects. It should be noted the final return and why of only 123 to match results below.

Table 1 reports the distribution of teachers according to gender, and academic qualification. Table 1 shows that 42.3% of respondents were males and 57.7% were females. With regard to academic qualification, teachers holding a bachelor degree in Special education were 26.8%, Diploma in Learning disabilities 28.5%, other bachelor degrees 17.9%, and MA in Special Education were 26.8%.

**Table 1**

**Distribution of Resource Room Teachers According to Gender, Academic Qualification**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	52	42.3%
Female	71	57.7%
Total	123	
<i>Academic Qualification</i>		
BA in SPED	33	26.8%
Diploma in LD	35	28.5%
Bachelor-others	22	17.9%
MA in SPED	33	26.8%
Total	123	

*Instrument*

The researchers developed a survey instrument consisting of three parts: The first part entailed the demographic data of the respondents. The second part consisted of 20-items measuring assessment practices used by resource room teachers for determining eligibility of LD students, where teachers responded using a yes-no format. These items were formulated based on a review of relevant literature (Yesseldyke, 2005; Dean & Burns, 2002; Fletcher, Denton & Francis, 2005; Mellard, Deshler & Barth, 2004; Gunderson & Siegel, 2001). The third part consisted of 14-items representing obstacles faced by resource room teachers to determine eligibility for learning disabilities. Teachers were asked to rate their responses using a three point Likert scale (Always, Sometimes, and Never).

To establish the face validity of the instrument, an initial version of the survey was given to ten faculty members from the Department of Counseling and Special Education, and the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Jordan. The panel of experts made comments and provided feedback on a few items and suggested merging some items due to similarity of their meanings, and re-phrasing some for more clarity; these suggested changes were taken into consideration. Also prior to distribution, the instrument was piloted on 25 resource room teachers working in public and private schools. Teachers' comments were incorporated in the final version of the instrument. However; this piloted sample was excluded from the sample of the study.

Reliability of this instrument was also established using the test-retest method. The correlation coefficient was calculated for both parts (second and third) of the survey: The practices of assessment part had a correlation coefficient of (.91), the obstacles of assessment part were (.87). Also, internal consistency was calculated using Cronbach Alpha for the obstacles of assessment part, with a value of (.86).

*Procedure*

A letter from the University of Jordan was sent to the Directorate of Special Education/ Ministry of Education supplemented by the survey. A request was made by the researchers to send the survey to the selected resource room teachers (150 resource room teachers) through the internal mail of the Ministry of Education. A letter accompanied each copy from the researchers explaining the study and the survey and requesting teachers' participation. Teachers were assured that the study was for scientific purposes only and that their responses were confidential and anonymous. They were urged to respond to all items to the best of their knowledge.

After two weeks of sending the survey, (108) surveys were sent back to the researchers. Follow-up calls were made to the rest of the selected sample to urge them to complete the survey. The total number obtained was 123 surveys out of 150, reflecting a return rate of (82%). Maybe state this in prior section under participants.

*Data Analysis*

A variety of statistical techniques were used to analyze the research data. These techniques included: means, standard deviations, t-tests for independent samples, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA).

**Results**

Data analysis revealed that most participants focused on teacher- made tests of academic achievement as a major component of assessment used in determining eligibility for learning disabilities. This item had the highest mean of (0.89) agreements among resource teachers.

Meanwhile, the lowest means of responses were obtained for the following items: Curriculum based assessment (mean 0.02), Students' Response to Intervention (mean 0.02), followed by Dynamic assessment (mean 0.01). Table 2 indicates resource room teachers' responses to assessment practices ranked in a descending order.

**Table 2**  
**A Descended Ranking Order of Teachers' Responses to Assessment Practices Used for Eligibility Determination of Learning Disabilities**

Number	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
	My decision on determining eligibility for Learning disability services was made upon:		
1.	Assessment of academic achievement based on teacher made tests.	0.89	0.31
2.	Information about social/ behavioral problems gathered through Checklists rating scales and observations.	0.82	0.38
3.	Reviewing school transcripts to determine under-achievement or variability of students' performance.	0.79	0.41
4.	Case study history	0.78	0.42
5.	Criterion referenced tests (i.e. Jordan national tests of Reading and Math)	0.77	0.42
6.	Measurement of Perceptual Ability (i.e. visual and auditory perception)	0.76	0.43
7.	Exclusion factor to rule out other disabilities (i.e. medical examination)	0.72	0.45
8.	Aptitude-achievement consistency analysis	0.72	0.45
9.	Referral of classroom teachers	0.67	0.47
10.	Personal knowledge and experience of students	0.63	0.48
11.	Using LD screening tools (checklists or rating scales)	0.63	0.48
12.	Deviation from grade level (Two years school age difference)	0.52	0.50
13.	Deviation from grade level (One year school age difference)	0.41	0.49
14.	Counselors opinions in the identification of LD students	0.35	0.48
15.	Determine severe discrepancy through standard score comparisons of intellectual abilities and achievement	0.28	0.45
16.	Using IQ tests to identify subtest scatter (verbal-performance discrepancies)	0.26	0.44
17.	Determining severe discrepancy using regression analysis	0.12	0.33
18.	Curriculum based assessment (CBA)	0.02	0.13
19.	Students' Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI)	0.02	0.13
20.	Dynamic assessment	0.01	0.09

**Table 3**  
**Problems in the assessment of LD students faced by Special Education teachers**

Number	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
	The most frequent assessment problems I encountered in the assessment and decision making of LD students are:		
1-	Due to Misconceptions about LD, general Education teachers for evaluation- especially for low achievers make higher rate of referrals.	2.6667	.55318
2-	The evaluation and assessment of LD students is a time consuming process	2.6198	.68625
3-	Resource room teachers are not fully qualified to assess students with LD	2.5528	.54627
4-	Lack of proper training in using assessment tools	2.4065	.67554
5-	Errors in referral and diagnosis made by the school system	2.2623	.67791
6-	Capacity limitations to accept further LD students in resource rooms, even if qualified for services	2.2439	.71679
7-	Lack of governmental criteria's, regulations and protocols regarding the assessment of LD students	2.2314	.73892
8-	Assessment tools used by resource room teachers do not distinguish LD students from low achievers and other mild disabilities	2.1626	.76151
9-	Assessment tools is not always available in schools	2.1545	.66570
10-	Most assessment tools lack appropriate psychometric characteristics (Reliability and validity)	2.1453	.69809
11-	Most test results used in the assessment process does not always translate to effective educational goals	2.0339	.66580
12-	Most test results used in the assessment process do not reflect the real strength and weaknesses of students	1.9661	.66580
13-	Parents pressure to seek special education programs for their children influence eligibility decisions	1.9350	.74372
14-	The use of non native tests without proper adaptation and standardization to the local environment	1.8739	.79782

T test for independent samples and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine if the apparent differences shown in the data were statistically significant. The results revealed that there was no statistically significant differences attributed to teacher gender in teachers' assessment practices for eligibility of learning disability students ( $T = -1.37$ ,  $p = 0.17$ ) or obstacles seen by resource room teachers ( $T=0.179$ ,  $p=0.8$ ).

In addition, the ANOVA test revealed that there was no statistically significant differences found due to teachers qualification related to obstacles ( $F =0.536$   $p=0.6$ ). While there were significant differences found in teachers' qualification in regard to assessment practices ( $F =4.53$ ,  $p=. 005$ ).

**Table4**  
**F-Test Results for the influence of teachers' qualification on teachers' assessment practices and obstacles faced by teachers**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Total Assessment Practices	Between Groups	70.155	3	23.385	4.538	.005*
	Within Groups	613.259	119	5.153		
	Total	683.415	122			
Total Obstacles	Between Groups	57.610	3	19.203	.536	.659
	Within Groups	4265.805	119	35.847		
	Total	4323.415	122			

\* $p < 0.05$

#### Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to discuss the assessment practices used by resource room teachers in Jordan; however, it was not in our intention to evaluate such practices, especially in light of the debate and

controversy over the assessment criteria used in the identification and decision making of students with learning disabilities.

The discrepancy formulas are criticized in the field of learning disability, and other methods of assessment have been recommended such as students' response to intervention (RTI). Nevertheless, many researchers are raising serious questions regarding the reliability of such practices (McMaster, Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2005).

Findings of this study suggested that most used assessment practices to determining eligibility for learning disabilities in Jordan rely on teachers made tests of achievement. This can be interpreted by the lack of formal assessment tools in Jordan; therefore, teachers are forced to develop alternative means of assessment based on their own knowledge of learning disabilities, and curriculum offered in Jordan.

On the other hand, assessment practices with the least means were Curriculum based assessment, Students' Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI), and Dynamic assessment. These findings were not surprising since resource room teachers in Jordan are not familiar with these practices. These concepts were only introduced recently to the field of learning disabilities. Therefore, most teachers were not accustomed to such practices.

The high rate of referrals by general education teachers was rated as the most frequent problem encountered by resource room teachers. All referred students must be subjected to further evaluation on the part of resource room teachers which lay more burden, especially that this process is a time consuming one. The high rate of referrals by general education teachers can be explained by the inconsistent level of knowledge about learning disabilities among general education teachers and their tendency to minimize the number of students who are facing academic failure in their classes. Our explanation is consistent with research or findings reported by Ysseldyke (2004) of the fact that many regular education teachers have a tendency to refer students that fail to make satisfactory academic progress or exhibits troubling behaviors.

Resource room teachers considered their own qualification in assessment to be a major problem. In most countries the process of assessment and evaluation of students with special needs is administered by psychologists; however, this is not the case in Jordan, where the process of assessment for eligibility decisions relies on resource room teachers whom pre-service qualification and training does not match such responsibilities. Most pre-service training programs put a huge emphasis on educational aspects of special education rather than on assessment methods. This confession by teachers spread a lot of skepticism about the credibility of the service as a whole. Indeed, this fact standing alone is sufficient to indicate that much is needed for the re-training of teachers to improve their practices and thus services.

T-test results indicated no significant differences on assessment practices and obstacles of assessment due to the teacher's gender. In most cases both males and females had similar pre-service training which influences their practices of assessment; In addition, resource room teachers usually carried out their work under similar conditions; therefore, significant differences in teachers' ratings for obstacles of assessment were not found.

ANOVA test revealed significant differences in teachers' qualification in regard to assessment practices in favor of teachers with Masters Degree in special education. Not surprisingly, teachers with master's degree in special education are expected to have more in-depth knowledge regarding assessment. During their educational track, they would have experienced advanced courses related to assessment and its methods, which had an impact on their practices. On the other hand, obstacles of assessment did not differ according to teachers' qualification. Regardless of academic qualification, all workers in the field perceived obstacles the same.

In light of the previous findings, it is necessary to pay more attention for both pre-service and in-service training offered in the domain of assessment and eligibility under the category of learning disabilities. Furthermore, national criteria for determining eligibility for learning disabilities in Jordan should be addressed to overcome any uncertainty of such decisions.

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