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# THE OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM'S LD INITIATIVE: A CONTEXT FOR INQUIRY AND CONSENSUS

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## Memo: Problems in Assessment of LD Children

[T]he fundamental problem in the assessment of the learning disabled is making the initial determination that a child is or is not learning disabled. This appears ... critical for at least two reasons. First, from a service point of view, an adequate diagnostic procedure assures us that appropriate children are being served. Second, from an administrative point of view, one can be assured when one speaks of learning-disabled children, one is referring to an identifiable group. Obviously, people are currently classifying children as LD with a variety of approaches. [S]ome of these approaches suffer from such conceptual problems that their validity must be questioned. Most ... suffer from sufficient technical problems such as to make them less than adequate.

Just as important as the initial decision that a learning disability exists, however, is the determination of appropriate programming. There is little reason for educators to be concerned about whether children are learning disabled unless it somehow relates to the education program that children receive. Decisions concerning appropriate programming for children would undoubtedly [be] best made using criterion-referenced instruments. At this point, [they] are not available.

The requirements in PL 94-142 for Protection in Evaluation Procedures, Least Restrictive Environments, and Individual Education Programs make the whole decision-making process for classification, placement and programming exceedingly complex. A critical concern ... is ... [how] assessment information relates to and is integrated with decision-making.

Many people have voiced concern over the critical nature of early identification of the learning disabled. I ... [agree] that this is extremely important. However ... we cannot hope to engage in early identification with all of its attendant difficulties unless and until we have resolved our definitional and operational problems.

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The U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) recently relocated their offices. Among the historical treasures found in the move was a carbon copy of a letter written by then junior staffer Lou Danielson to a university professor. Although Lou's letter was written in 1977, 27 years ago, it could well have been composed today. Indeed, points nearly identical to Lou's were made in a letter written during the 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reauthorization process by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD).

OSEP's comprehensive response to the NJCLD letter has become known as the "LD Initiative," a multi-year process involving many activities and numerous stakeholders intended to probe, document, and discuss what we know about the identification and classification of children with learning disabilities (LD). Below, we describe OSEP's LD Initiative, including the creation of the National Research Center on LD.

### **Background**

In 1975, Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), now known as the IDEA. A central intent of the law was to guarantee a free appropriate public education for all children with disabilities. This would be accomplished by supporting states and localities to improve child outcomes by protecting the rights, and meeting the individual needs, of all children and youth with disabilities and their families. Early and accurate identification of children with disabilities was viewed as critical to ensuring that they receive services essential to their success. Much progress has been made over the past three decades in providing effective programming, special education, and other related services to children with disabilities.

In 1997, the reauthorization of IDEA changed the focus of the law from providing *access* to services to improving *results* and accountability. Essential to achieving improved results is the accurate and early identification of children with disabilities. Improving the identification of children with LD has been a major concern of the special education field for many years, and it emerged as a prominent issue in the current reauthorization discussions, with both the current House and Senate bills addressing LD identification issues.

During the comment period of the 1997 reauthorization, NJCLD sent a letter to OSEP encouraging the agency to focus on LD identification. NJCLD was given a commitment by the administration that, if NJCLD would delay in-depth discussions of this issue until after the 1997 reauthorization process, a comprehensive plan would be developed to explore it.

### **The LD Initiative**

In 2000, OSEP developed a plan to discuss LD identification issues. A planning committee consisting of researchers, parents, trainers, local education agencies, state education agencies, advocates, and policy makers was convened. This committee strongly endorsed OSEP's suggestion that a select group of researchers synthesize current information on key issues related to LD identification to serve as a foundation for subsequent discussions. To incorporate a range of perspectives, and to promote a transparent process, researchers, professional organizations, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders were invited to participate in one or more phases of the LD initiative.

To date, activities of the LD Initiative have included (a) the commission of nine papers (and written responses to these papers) on issues critical to LD identification; (b) the sponsorship of an LD Summit; (c) the orchestration of a series of roundtable discussions with key stakeholders on the commissioned papers, reaction papers, and LD Summit discussions; and (d) the dissemination of the commissioned papers, reaction papers, and LD Summit proceedings.

Regarding the first activity, the commissioned papers addressed nine key issues: an historical perspective, early identification and intervention, classification approaches, decision making, IQ-achievement discrepancy, alternative methods of LD identification, including Responsiveness-To-Intervention, processing deficits, clinical judgment, and the reality of the LD construct. Reaction papers were solicited for each commissioned paper from researchers and practitioners with expertise in LD. Eventually, the papers and reactions were published to ensure broad dissemination (see Bradley et al., 2002).

The second activity was a two-day summit in August 2001 in Washington, DC, called "Building a Foundation for the Future." The goal of the summit was to highlight the commissioned papers, underscore the importance of the topics addressed, and provide an opportunity for extended and informed discussion. Two hundred and fifty parents, teachers, administrators, researchers, teacher trainers, members of professional organizations, and policy makers were invited.

Third, following the summit, structured discussions were conducted in a series of stakeholder roundtables. The goal was for numerous stakeholders with unique perspectives to analyze the commissioned papers and summit presentations and to explore implications for research, policy, and practice. The first roundtable brought together researchers, who were charged with trying to develop consensus statements on critical identification issues based on the research papers. In subsequent roundtables, practitioners, policy makers,

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and parents considered various implications of the researchers' consensus statements.

### **Researcher Consensus Statements**

Selected researchers were given the task of synthesizing the information in the nine papers and identifying areas of consensus. Eight consensus statements were developed. They address the following topics: the concept of LD, the responsibility of special education to children with LD, the reality of LD as a lifelong disorder, prevalence rates, IQ-achievement discrepancy, processing deficit, response to intervention, and effective interventions. Detailed description of each of the consensus statements may be found in Bradley et al. (2002). Several are worthy of additional description here because of their importance in ongoing discussions in Congress.

**The concept of LD.** Strong converging evidence supports the validity of the concept of specific LD. This evidence is particularly impressive because it converges across different indicators and methodologies. The central concept of specific LD involves disorders of learning and cognition that are intrinsic to the individual. LD are specific in the sense that these disorders each significantly affect a relatively narrow range of academic and performance outcomes. LD may occur in combination with other disabling conditions, but they are not due primarily to other conditions, such as mental retardation, behavioral disturbance, lack of opportunities to learn, or primary sensory deficits.

**Prevalence rates.** It is difficult to know the true prevalence rate of LD. However, based on reading research, approximately 6% of students may exhibit LD in reading and will need special education intervention. Prevalence rates for students with LD involving math and written expression are difficult to estimate given the current lack of research evidence.

**IQ-achievement discrepancy.** The majority of researchers agreed: IQ-achievement discrepancy is neither necessary nor sufficient for identifying individuals with LD. IQ tests do not need to be given in most evaluations of children with LD. However, there should be evidence that an individual with LD is performing above the range associated with mental retardation, either by performance on achievement tests or by performance on a screening measure of intellectual aptitude or adaptive behavior.

A minority opinion was also expressed: Aptitude-achievement discrepancy is an appropriate marker of

LD, but is not sufficient to document the presence or absence of underachievement, which is a critical aspect of the concept of LD.

**Response to intervention.** There should be alternative ways to identify individuals with LD in addition to achievement testing, history, and observations of the child. Response to scientifically valid and generally effective intervention is the most promising method of alternative identification and can both promote effective practices in schools and help to close the gap between identification and treatment.

### **The National Research Center on Learning Disabilities**

Although the LD Initiative was originally designed as a series of activities with an anticipated end, due to the complexity of the issues and the diversity of discussion, it became apparent that ongoing work was needed. To address this need, OSEP funded a National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) in 2002. Its primary purpose is to continue research on the critical issues raised in the papers and follow-up roundtables; to begin to explore an alternative process for more efficient and accurate identification of children with LD; to track LD identification practices at the state and local levels; and to provide technical assistance and disseminate research based practices to states. An additional activity has been to operationalize the concept of response-to-intervention, identify factors affecting its implementation, and find model sites at the district or school levels.

The articles in this issue describe many of the activities in which NRCLD staff have been engaged during the past two years. For additional information on the NRCLD, log on to [www.NRCLD.org](http://www.NRCLD.org). For information on IDEA, the status of reauthorization, or OSEP, log on to [www.ED.GOV/offices/OSERS/OSEP](http://www.ED.GOV/offices/OSERS/OSEP).

### **REFERENCES**

- Bradley, R., Danielson, L., & Hallahan, D. (Eds.). (2002). *Identification of learning disabilities: Research to practice*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 U.S.C. § 1401 et, seq.; 34 C.F.R. §300 et seq.

### **AUTHORS' NOTE**

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