
THE PLAY'S THE THING

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The modern special education theater in the United States has hosted many plays, none with a larger or more diverse cast than the learning disabilities (LD) play. During the prologue the children with LD were waiting in the wings, not yet identified as LD but there, nonetheless. With the advent of compulsory education in this country, our awareness of these children and our concern for them grew.

My vantage point from which to observe and participate in LD in the 1960s was that of close association with Kirk, my doctoral advisor, and Engelmann, the creator of direct instruction, the highly effective pedagogy. Then, in the early '70s law school called. I hoped to find tools to persuade schools to adopt proven, available teaching methods and materials. Now, 30 years later, it appears that hope may be realized through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; 2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997, 2004) (IDEA), as both compel attention to the research base for the services we provide.

ACT ONE

At center stage in Act One of LD was the Wayne County Training School in Michigan. In the 1920s, '30s and '40s, the cast there included predecessors and pioneers of the LD field – Doll, Strauss, Werner, Cruickshank, Kephart, Lehtinen, Kirk, and others. There, Kirk was immersed in the study of mental retardation, brain injury, and more. That work, plus his work with Monroe in remediating reading disabilities, laid the foundation for his leadership in the emergence of the LD field in the 1960s.

ACT TWO

In the late 1950s and the early 1960s, the time was ripe for LD to move onto center stage. The social and education scenes were influenced by a powerful, optimistic spirit of can-do, fix-it, environmentalism. John F. Kennedy was president, Camelot was tangible, and the infant Head Start and Follow Through projects were

thriving. The Peace Corps said “it-can-be-better” and it was, in far away places.

Kirk had the leading role in LD as it emerged from its roots in language disorders, reading, and brain injury. From his extensive background in mental retardation, brain injury, and reading disabilities, he distilled the three conceptual linchpins of LD, the first of which was the educability of intelligence. He spoke often of Binet's insistence that once we could measure intelligence, the next imperative was to improve it. Second, Kirk believed that pronounced intraindividual differences were the hallmark of LD. The first children labeled LD at the Institute for Research on Exceptional Children demonstrated huge peaks and valleys among their cognitive and other abilities. Kirk emphatically distinguished these children from those who have mental retardation and, therefore, relatively flat profiles. Lastly, Kirk believed that while traditional psychological/psychiatric diagnoses led to labeling (e.g., as in DSM-IV), educational diagnoses should lead to recommendations for what and how to teach.

The Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (ITPA)¹ (Kirk & McCarthy, 1961) launched the contemporary LD field. Three major premises underlay Kirk's ITPA: (a) specific psychological, linguistic, and cognitive abilities can be assessed, in contrast to global assessments such as IQ or reading level; (b) specific deficit areas can be improved by direct teaching; and (c) it is important to have a psychometric tool capable of demonstrating gains in specific areas of remediation.

These premises were shared by the authors of other assessment tools widely used during this exciting emergence of LD – Frostig's Developmental Test of Visual Perception (Frostig, Maslow, Lefever, & Whittlesey, 1964); the Beery Test of Visual Motor Integration (Beery, 1967); and the Purdue Perceptual Motor Scale (Roach & Kephart, 1966). Deficits were precisely identified and specific remedial materials provided to decrease the intraindividual differences and move the child's profile closer to “normal.”

These and similar instruments were accepted enthusiastically and uncritically by a field being inundated by referrals. LD in the early '60s was stimulating and exciting, and the professionals were passionate and committed. We learned more every day about how to teach previously hard-to-teach children. Teachers and parents were positive, interested, and eager to try whatever the LD professionals suggested, from creeping and crawling to diet.

The definition of LD, now controversial, was not an issue when the term learning disabilities was first introduced by Kirk in 1962, but by the late 1960s, the definition battle had begun. Two national committees, Task Force I (Clements, 1966) and II (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1969), were appointed to report on LD. The Task Force I definition of LD children said they have average or above intelligence and their disabilities are due to central nervous system dysfunctions. Task Force II rejected that definition and concluded that no one definition was acceptable to all educators. How right they were.

Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, remedial programs and "cures" flourished, as rigorous evaluative studies were few and far between. When science leaves room, a variety of enterprises enter, not unlike what we now see with autism.

ACT THREE

In November 1975 President Ford signed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, and special education was changed forever. Two years later, the operational definition of LD was enshrined in federal regulation. Pressure mounted for a system to identify LD students that required little or no expertise. The result was mathematical, tabled formulas that reduced each child to one dot representing estimated intellectual ability and one dot representing the deficient achievement area.

Seemingly overnight, the limited expertise of the LD field had been overwhelmed by the numbers of children believed by parents and teachers to have LD. University training programs for professionals interested in LD, many of them excellent, had been established by the pioneers and their progeny. But before the need for LD specialists was fully met, in the early '80s, Madeline Willis' Regular Education Initiative began the move away from specialized LD classes, services, methods, and teachers.

ACT FOUR

Congress recognized the discrepancy issue and, in IDEA 2004, relieved local education agencies of the necessity to consider discrepancy and allowed them to use response-to-intervention (RTI) as part of the LD evaluation/eligibility process.

Kirk's concept of significant intraindividual differences was central to LD for 40 years, a rather long run for an educational concept. It is no longer an essential component. However, it may be back. If the history of special education, especially LD, teaches us anything, it is that we live in a 30- to 40-year cycle. The ITPA is now back, much improved and underutilized; modality learning styles came back after 30 years and have all but gone again, remedial balance activities are back, precision teaching has re-emerged as curriculum-based measurement and fluency, and on and on. Even RTI is reminiscent of the early '60s at the University of Illinois when one frequently heard "Show me a child Engelmann can't teach, and I'll show real LD."

Now is a difficult time in which to characterize the field of LD. The dilution and near disappearance of intensive, specialized LD services in public schools is sad and frustrating. Few parents of LD students are able to persuade hearing officers or courts that their children's unique needs should be addressed by intensive, specialized instruction. Until now, schools have claimed successfully that they, not research, determine methodology and that any progress the child makes is sufficient to constitute FAPE.

On the other hand, the *Handbook of Learning Disabilities* (Swanson, Harris, & Graham, 2003) documents most impressive strides taken in the last 15 years toward a sound, scientific knowledge base for the field. Similarly, the consensus about the essential components of reading instruction seen in the National Reading Panel Report (NICHD, 2000) is exciting, even though the broad strokes have been known to many for decades.

NCLB (2001) may eventually have as profound an effect as IDEA on special education. NCLB's mandate for scientifically based research evidence of reading programs' effectiveness surely will apply to those used with LD students. In fact, IDEA 2004 already requires that the special education, related services, and supplementary services in IEPs be "based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable" (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(IV)).

ANOTHER ACT

Special education law, like special education itself, is a hugely mixed bag – a strong force for good when properly conceptualized and implemented, and otherwise a waste of time and money. A major disappointment has been the reluctance of hearing officers, judges, and the public schools themselves to honor research establishing the effectiveness of certain techniques, strategies, and methodologies and materials.

The new IDEA mandate for services "based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable" (20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1)(A)(i)(IV)) invites some cynicism, especially

in contrast to NCLB's rigorous definition of its mandated scientific research basis for reading programs. Under NCLB, the states must ensure that funding goes only to reading programs founded on research that

(1) employs systematic, empirical methods ... (2) involves rigorous data analyses ... (3) relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators ... (4) has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective and scientific review. (§1208(6))

The role of law in the future of LD is unclear now that the discrepancy concept is no longer mandated, RTI is a recognized evaluation technique, and research-based methods may be required. Research in LD, on the other hand, seems certain to continue its productive, exciting course. Finally, if the 30- to 40-year cycle continues, we may yet again see specially trained teachers, intensive specialized instruction and settings designed to address the unique needs of LD students.

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FOOTNOTES

¹. An important but nearly lost foundation stone of the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities was Dorothy Siever's Differential Language Facilities Test (Sievers, 1955), developed as part of her doctoral dissertation under the direction of Sam Kirk.