

Alternative models of learning disabilities identification:
considerations and initial conclusions

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Abstract

The final session of the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) Responsiveness-to-Intervention (RTI) Symposium, “What are alternative models to LD identification other than RTI?” included four papers that discussed concerns over the exclusive reliance on an RTI approach to learning disability identification, considerations for analyzing proposed LD identification models, and various alternatives to LD identification. The work of the participating panelists is summarized in this discussant paper, and next steps for the NRCLD in light of these presentations are suggested.

The primary purpose of the Responsiveness-to-Intervention (RTI) Symposium hosted by the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) was to investigate the use of RTI as a means of learning disabilities (LD) identification. However, a need was recognized to consider critiques of the RTI model and alternate viewpoints. Whereas RTI addresses some shortcomings in our identification and control of LD, issues concerning LD identification are far from settled. Panelists representing different experiences and frameworks of LD identification were asked to offer their perspectives on its critical elements. Specifically, panelists were asked to consider other assessment frameworks that could be useful for a school setting, workable strategies for ensuring acceptable levels of fidelity, and ways to improve LD identification. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the issues presented by the panelists in the session, “What are alternative models to LD identification other than RTI?”

Consideration of policy changes requires systematic discussion about the opportunity costs and trade-offs in the decision making. This final session of the symposium is illustrative of the commitment by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the NRCLD to maintain a dialogue on alternatives to LD identification. This paper is presented in two sections and represents the work of the four participating panelists. The first section outlines Scruggs’s (2003) framework of considerations for any LD identification model as an orientation to the importance of how the construct of LD becomes defined and operationalized through a model. In the second section, alternatives to LD identification presented by Fletcher and Denton (2003), Kavale, Holdnack, Mostert, and Schmied (2003), and Semrud-Clikeman (2003) are discussed and considered in light of these considerations.

Proposed Framework of Considerations for Any LD Model

Scruggs (2003) highlighted unique components of the LD definition that could be operationalized to provide a more comprehensive approach to LD identification than either current approaches or an RTI model alone might offer. These components include the following:

1. Preservation of the concept of LD. Current conceptualizations of LD include various aspects that extend beyond low achievement. These considerations include the notion that LD manifests itself through unexpected low achievement for students with average or above-average intelligence, intraindividual differences, processing deficits, difficulties that are multifaceted in nature, and demonstrated patterns of relative strengths and weaknesses. An identification system must be comprehensive enough to capture the various aspects of our contemporary conceptualizations of LD.
2. Discrimination. Although a general shift has occurred toward a non-categorical approach to special education in the schools, an argument can easily be advanced that maintaining disability categories is critical for purposes of intervention, advocacy, research, funding, and legislation (Scruggs, 2003). Students who do not respond to intervention might have learning problems due to other factors, such as mental retardation, emotional or behavioral disorders, attention-deficit disorder, other disability conditions, or generic low achievement. Any model of LD identification should be able to discriminate reliably between students who have learning disabilities and students whose learning problems are due to other factors.
3. Multifaceted nature of LD. Learning disabilities can manifest themselves in many areas. Current definitions include problems in math concepts, computation, reading comprehension, decoding, writing, spelling, memory, attention, and organizational

skills. An identification system must incorporate reliable and valid measures of these various areas.

4. Age levels. Specific learning disabilities persist across the life span, although manifestations and intensity may vary as a function of developmental and environmental demands. This persistence across the life span requires an LD identification system that covers the spectrum of age levels including preschool, primary grades, and elementary, middle, and high school.
5. Technical adequacy. An LD identification system must be reliable, valid, and applicable across school settings. Many of the current criticisms of discrepancy models stem from the lack of fidelity with which they are implemented and the wide variability in practices. Fidelity of implementation is the critical but difficult-to-manage component.

Under this framework, the main criticisms of RTI include the claim that the multifaceted construct of LD is reduced to a single facet, reading disability. Subsequently, a single-faceted approach cannot discriminate between students with learning disabilities and those students whose learning problems are due to other factors. In addition, although the focus on early identification and intervention is important, RTI currently does not cover the whole spectrum of age levels. Finally, many critics voice grave concern over the lack of assurance that the process is implemented with integrity across both general and special education on a large-scale level.

Alternative Models of LD Identification

Panelists in this session offered the following alternatives to LD identification that attempt to address the considerations outlined by Scruggs (2003). Their comments are briefly summarized below:

Fletcher and Denton (2003) proposed a six-step procedure that considers both concerns about RTI in the identification of learning disabilities and problems with current procedures.

1. RTI would be implemented as a standardized prereferral system and a means of ensuring that learning problems are not due to poor instruction.
2. Students identified as having LD will demonstrate very low achievement in one or more significant areas of school functioning documented from more than one record.
3. Students identified as having LD will meet exclusionary criteria.
4. Students will demonstrate a discrepancy evidenced by learning expectations based on multiple administrations of the same test over time given appropriate interventions.
5. Early identification will be encouraged so that appropriate remedial services can be maximized.
6. Final decisions are made by a team and supported by evidence.

Kavale et al. (2003) presented a comprehensive framework for LD determination that contrasts with Fletcher and Denton's perspectives offered above. Kavale et al. list these components:

1. Interindividual academic ability analysis
2. Evaluation of exclusionary factors
3. Interindividual cognitive ability analysis
4. Reevaluation of exclusionary factors

5. Integrated ability analysis; evaluation of underachievement
6. Evaluation of interference with functioning
7. Related considerations such as limitations in social skills and motor, visual, and hearing functioning

Scruggs (2003) presented a model similar to both Fletcher and Denton's and Kavale and colleagues' in that (a) the focus is on addressing each critical component of the definition of specific learning disabilities (SLD), (b) the model integrates RTI as a large-scale prereferral system, and (c) the model attempts to provide increased standardization of the process of LD identification.

Semrud-Clikeman (2003) focused on the aspects of individual differences and psychological processing deficits when considering alternatives to LD identification. Working memory, processing speed, auditory processing ability, and executing functions are four neuropsychological processes that she highlights as important for inclusion in LD identification models. Although the focus on processing disorders underlies the historical conceptualization of LD and many researchers support retaining the emphasis on processing deficits in its identification, the tools to evaluate and then link appropriate interventions to these evaluations do not currently exist.

Similarities and Initial Conclusions of the Presented Models

Although the alternatives presented vary in scope and procedure, the alternative models share several common characteristics that attempt to address the criticisms of RTI. All of the models retain the multifaceted nature of the LD construct by maintaining the focus of identification on several factors, including evaluation of psychological processes, intraindividual discrepancies, and requiring the exclusionary criteria to rule out external factors as possible contributors to low achievement. In addition, under the proposed models, RTI is viewed as what Kavale and colleagues (2003) term "prereferral writ large," which would help ensure appropriate instructional experiences in the general classroom, but which in itself is insufficient as an LD identification system. Most important, the proposed alternatives maintain that a student with a learning disability fundamentally differs from a student with low achievement, and that this key difference is likely reflected in disorders in psychological processes. All of the panelists noted that the critical element of the current LD definition is the emphasis on deficits or disorders in psychological processes. Although the assessment of processing skills remains problematic, the alternatives presented during this session emphasize the importance of operationalizing this critical component of the LD definition, especially in light of advances in current theories and research about the importance of processing skills.

Collectively, the alternatives to LD identification presented underscore the enormity of the task ahead. Current practices of LD identification have long been criticized because of the lack of congruence between the definition and the classification criteria. A framework for creating criteria that are consistent with accepted definitions of LD, such as the one presented by Scruggs (2003), should be an integral part of evaluating models proposed for LD identification. A serious consideration for any alternative is the fidelity with which it can be implemented. Although the alternatives presented here have aligned definitions with classification criteria and suggested ways to improve standardization, the difficulties with large-scale implementation of practice are well documented and will require considerable attention, evaluation, and discussion

to ensure that any proposed alternative is implemented with sufficient technical adequacy. Considerations of large-scale adoption of any LD identification model need to undergo scrutiny based on this framework in both theoretical discussions and practical applications.

Conclusion

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides an opportunity to address concerns about the appropriate identification of students with SLD. Presently, states and school districts use many variations to make that determination. Furthermore, research has described the consequences of those variations. These consequences have raised issues of equity, accuracy, timeliness, outcomes, feasibility, and consistency as alternative SLD identification models are considered. The concept of response to intervention is part of an alternative approach to the identification process that is currently being investigated by the NRCLD and OSEP. A key component of this investigation includes attempts to minimize the unintended consequences of any proposed system to ensure that students with LD are not only properly identified but also receive appropriate and effective interventions. Working with Regional Resource Centers, state education agencies, and local EAs to develop and implement systems of LD identification remains a crucial focus of the NRCLD as the field moves forward.

In this connection, the final session of the NRCLD's RTI Symposium sought to gain various perspectives related to classification validity, alternate assessment frameworks that could be useful for school settings, workable strategies for ensuring acceptable levels of fidelity, and means to improve LD identification. The work presented demonstrated the significance of continued emphasis on the complex nature of LD with particular attention to processing skills.

In light of the concerns with RTI voiced by the four researchers in this session of the symposium, alternative models continue to be investigated, as do concerns with the exclusive reliance on RTI for identification. THE NRCLD will continue its mission to conduct research on the identification of learning disabilities; formulate implementation recommendations; disseminate findings; and provide technical assistance to national, state, and local constituencies. As a result of our research findings, we will develop recommendations that promote the use of research-based best practices and that result in the improved identification of students with LD.

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