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What Are Learning Disabilities?

Although no definition of *learning disability* is universally accepted, every state in the United States delivers services to students who have learning disabilities or one of its substitute terms, such as *perceptual and communication disorders*. In general, students identified with specific learning disabilities are those who are performing poorly in some academic area. They present a discrepancy between actual performance and the level at which professionals and parents think they should achieve, and this discrepancy is not due to any identifiable disability.

Most states use the definition specified in the guidelines and regulations that accompanied the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or a definition that will produce an equivalent population. At the time we write this book, IDEA has been reauthorized. We expect it will take a year or two to produce the regulations and guidelines that actually have the most impact on practice. So until new regulations and guidelines are written, educational professionals are relying on the federal guidelines for the 1997 reauthorization. According to those guidelines, a *specific learning disability* means

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell,

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or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such a term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (U.S. Department of Education, 1997)

CRITICISM OF THE DEFINITION

When this definition was first proposed, many educators deemed it vague and unacceptable. Three problems were most troublesome. First, the definition caused a rift between those who supported the importance of identifying underlying causes of learning disabilities, such as psychological processing disorders, and those who did not. Second, the definition alienated adults with learning disabilities by referring only to children. Third, the definition included an ambiguous exclusion clause that did not clearly state that learning disabilities can exist with other disabilities but cannot be the result of them. This created confusion in the field.

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFICATION

To address some of these concerns, the U.S. Department of Education has specified criteria to be used in identifying students with learning disabilities. A team of professionals who have a variety of experiences with the student as well as assessment information must determine if the student does not achieve at a level judged appropriate. The team looks at one or more of the following areas:

1. Listening comprehension
2. Oral expression

3. Written expression
4. Basic reading skill
5. Reading comprehension
6. Mathematics calculation
7. Mathematics reasoning

In making the decision, the team is permitted to search for a discrepancy between academic achievement and intellectual ability in at least one of the seven areas. A student is not identified as having a specific learning disability if the discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of another disability, such as a visual, hearing, or motor disability, mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or if it is due to perceived environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. With the new reauthorization of IDEA, Congress eliminated the demonstration of a discrepancy as a criterion and gave school districts permission to identify students as learning disabled (LD) when they failed to respond to evidence-based instruction (instruction that previously has been shown by researchers to work with other students their age).

The discrepancy criterion was removed as a requirement because professionals cannot agree on the magnitude of the difference between expected and actual achievement necessary for a student to be identified with specific learning disabilities. Some states had been using one grade level and others used at least two; some states used 15 standard score points and others used 23 or 30. When the specific criteria vary, different numbers and types of students are provided special education services. Specific criteria for identification as LD under the new legal requirements have not yet been specified; there is no official definition of failure to respond to appropriate instruction and for that matter, no definition of appropriate instruction. So the jury is still out on whether the new rules will resolve the difficulties apparent in implementation of discrepancy formulas.