Learning Disabilities: Issues on Definition

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities

This statement was developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD). Representatives of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) were Rhonda S. Work, Chair; Mabel L. Rice; Stan Dublinske, ex officio. Ann L. Carey, 1988-1990 vice president for professional and governmental affairs was the monitoring vice president. Other member organizations of the NJCLD include the Association on Handicapped Student Services Programs in Postsecondary Education; Council for Learning Disabilities; Division for Children with Communication Disorders; Division for Learning Disabilities; International Reading Association; Learning Disabilities Association of America; National Association of School Psychologists; and Orton Dyslexia Society. This statement was approved by the ASHA Legislative Council in November 1989 (LC 2-89). NOTE: This statement could not be published until other members of the NJCLD had approved the document.

Enactment of the Education For All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) mandated changes in the assessment and education of individuals with varying disabilities. The Act provides the basis for securing a systematic methodology for the identification, assessment, and education of children and youth with disabilities. Of specific interest to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) are those individuals identified categorically within the Law as having learning disabilities.

Federal regulations state that an individual may have a learning disability when a severe discrepancy exists between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, and mathematical reasoning. While the law and regulations have specified the areas of deficits that constitute learning disabilities, there remain widespread problems with the definition, methods for identifying the individuals to be served, and problems in delineating the assessment team's membership and responsibilities. The following statement of the NJCLD addresses problems resulting from the Federal definition of learning disabilities.

The Definition of Learning Disabilities

In 1967, the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) developed a definition of learning disabilities, a definition that is quoted widely and is included in PL 94-142.

> "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 an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

While other definitions of learning disabilities exist among different professional organizations and state education agencies, it was the NACHC definition that provided the basis for legislation and fund-

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ing that resulted in the establishment of education programs for children with learning disabilities and programs for the preparation of professionals. Numerous positive effects have been realized through the definition and general goals of PL 94-142. However, interpretation of the definition has resulted in a series of problems that have affected theoretical and service-delivery issues in learning disabilities. Some of these issues include the following:

1. The Federal definition of learning disabilities frequently has been misinterpreted. This has led many people to regard those with learning disabilities as a homogeneous group of individuals. This conclusion is clearly erroneous. The definition also has led to the belief that a standard approach to assessment and educational management exists for individuals with learning disabilities. Practices related to identification, assessment, and remediation were keyed to this misinterpretation of the definition with resulting confusion in these areas.

   The NJCLD urges that "learning disabilities" be recognized as a general term referring to a heterogeneous group of disorders. These disorders are realized as significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of one or more of the following functions: listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, and mathematical abilities.

   Individuals with such disabilities also may evidence problems in their ability to self-regulate behaviors and demonstrate altered patterns of social perception and social interaction. The idea that these problems can exist with learning disabilities has been acknowledged by the NJCLD and is consistent with current research findings. The inclusion of this idea within the definition is, therefore, timely and contributes to a better understanding of individuals with learning disabilities. However, the NJCLD does not believe or support the argument that problems of self-regulation, social perception and/or interaction alone constitute a learning disability.

   Furthermore, the fact that the learning disabled population includes different subgroups of individuals can no longer be ignored. An integration of the results of past and current research and clinical-educational experience related to these subgroups is essential to identifying the "who" in learning disabilities.
2. The use of "children" in the federal definition limits the applicability of the term 'learning disabilities' to individuals 0-21 years of age. This results in a failure to recognize the developmental nature of learning disabilities. Indeed, learning disabilities must be viewed as a problem not only of the school years, but of early childhood and continuing into adult life. It is, therefore, a problem that may occur across the life span.
3. The etiology of learning disabilities is not stated clearly within the federal definition but is implied by a listing of terms and disorders. The NJCLD urges that the disorders represented by the collective term "learning disabilities" are understood as intrinsic to the individual and that the basis of the disorders is presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Although the NJCLD supports the idea that failure to learn or to attain curricular expectations occurs for diverse reasons, learning disabilities have their basis in inherently altered processes of acquiring and using information. It is essential to understand this notion if one is to appreciate the resultant interaction between the learner and the learning environments. An understanding of this interaction facilitates the development of effective service delivery models and adaptive curriculum. This also leads to a clearer understanding of the ways in which individuals with learning disabilities may interact in a life-long social and cultural milieu.

   The NJCLD believes that the idea of central nervous system dysfunction as a basis for learning disabilities is appropriate. This must not, however, restrict the identification of a learning disability to the physician. In fact, many individuals with manifest central nervous system dysfunction, such as individuals with cerebral palsy, do not necessarily evidence learning disorders. For the individual with learning disabilities, evidence of central nervous system dysfunction may or may not be elicited during the course of a medical-neurological examination. The critical elements in the diagnosis of learning disabilities are elicited during psychological, educational and/or language assessments.

   An understanding of etiological mechanisms (a) facilitates a determination of prognosis, (b) provides information to individuals and their families that helps to clarify their understanding of the manifest disorder(s), and (c) provides direction for research studies that will influence educational practice.

4. The wording of the "exclusion clause" in the Federal definition of learning disabilities lends itself to the misinterpretation that individuals with learning disabilities cannot be multihandicapped or be from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is essential to understand and recognize the learning disabilities as they might occur within the varying disability categories as well as different cultural and linguistic groups. Individuals within these groups frequently have received inappropriate educational assessment, planning, and instruction because they could not be identified as learning disabled.

   The NJCLD supports the idea that learning disabilities are not the primary and direct result of other disabilities and should not be so confused. However, the NJCLD notes specifically that learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other disabilities. Although these individuals may be served educationally through different service modes, a denial of the existence of significant learning disabilities will result in inappropriate assessment and educational instruction and can result in the denial of direct or indirect professional services.

5. In addition to changes made in the 1981 definition related to social behavior, the following changes were made to clarify or simplify the language of the definition.
   1. The word "generic" was changed to "general."
   2. The term "environmental influences" was changed to "extrinsic influences."
   3. The phrase "social and emotional disturbance" was changed to "serious emotional disturbance."
   4. The word "direct" was deleted.

In the light of the preceding discussion, the NJCLD recommends the following definition of learning disabilities:

> *Learning disabilities* is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences.

*In January 1981, the NJCLD developed a new definition of learning disabilities that was adopted by all member organizations except the Learning Disabilities Association of America. The 1981 definition read as follows:

> *Learning disabilities* is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences.

In the following years, the NJCLD continued to review the literature and practice related to defining and identifying individuals with learning disabilities. As a result of new information available in the literature, the NJCLD revised its 1981 definition. The revised definition has been formally adopted as the official definition of learning disabilities by the following NJCLD member organizations: American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, Council for Learning Disabilities, Division for Children with Communication Disorders, International Reading Association, National Association of School Psychologists, and Orton Dyslexia Society. The Learning Disabilities Association has not adopted the revised definition and the Division for Learning Disabilities has taken no action on the definition.