

Lecture 1

Book: Students with Learning Disabilities

Chapter 1: History, Current Directions, Definitions and Characteristics

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Summary

1. Understanding Learning Disabilities – A Historical Perspective

The history of Learning Disabilities has been divided into three main categories and they are the Foundation Period, the Emergent Period and the Solidification Period.

Foundation Period (1800-1960): In the early 1800's, research began in Europe on the relationship of the brain and mental impairment with large focus on brain injury and hemispheric dominance. Famous scientists of the time were Franz Joseph Gall, Carl Wernicke, John Baptiste Bouilland, Henry Head and James Hinshelwood. Initial research focused on adults but it later shifted to children. Notably, Samuel T. Orton carried out studies on brain injury and its' relation to language disabilities in children. Other notable researchers included Marion Monroe, Anna Gillingham, Bessie Stillman, Samuel A. Kirk, Grace Fernald and Romalda Spalding. Their researches lead to the emergence of multisensory (audio, visual, kinesthetic, tactile) teaching. In addition to this, in the 1950's there was widespread awareness among Americans regarding the importance of education for all children. Public pressure lead to a ten year period of radical change in the American society, and education for children with learning disabilities emerged and flourished.

Emergent Period (1961-1974): During this period, the term 'minimal brain dysfunction' (MBD) was introduced by Clements (1966). Although popular with physicians, the MBD terminology was never widely accepted by educators. Similarly, Samuel A. Kirk coined the term 'learning disabilities' to refer to children who were neither blind, retarded or crippled but who were having difficulties learning in mainstream settings. Parents, who had been dissatisfied with the existing terms, accepted the new term enthusiastically and formed the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (ACLAD), which is now the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA). In 1964 ACLAD was established formally. Additionally, during this period, public school programs rapidly expanded, federal involvement intensified, organizations solidified and grew and tests and intervention approaches from various theoretical viewpoints were applied.

Solidification Period (1975-1986): The main significance of this period was the passing of the Public Law 94-142 on November 29, 1975 which ensured the provision of a free, appropriate public education to all children with disabilities. Furthermore, in 1986, the Public Law 99-475 was passed, extending the rights and provisions of Public Law 94-142 to infants and preschoolers and requiring the development of an individualized family service plan (IFSP) for these young children. In addition to this, Madeleine Will (1986) promoted Regular Education Initiative (REI), which stated that students with learning disabilities should be educated in the general classroom.

2. *Contemporary Issues in the Field of Learning Disabilities*

As the field of learning disabilities evolved and expanded, it encountered several issues. This period has been termed as the Turbulent Period (1987 – Present). During this period, President George H.W. Bush signed the Public Law 101-476, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1990, which changed the name of the law to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Throughout the law, the term handicapped was ‘replaced’ with the term ‘disabilities’. Other changes included greater emphasis on meeting the needs of the ethnically and culturally diverse children with disabilities, the development of early intervention programs to address the needs of children prenatally exposed to maternal substance abuse, the continuation of an information dissemination program through the establishment of centers in each state that provide parents with training and materials about special education and the authorization of funding to continue three national information clearinghouses on children and youth with disabilities. Another important legislative action during this period was the passage of Public Law 102-119 in 1991 which amended IDEA to provide comprehensive services to infants, toddlers and preschool children who are eligible through a non categorical identification (such as developmental delay) or a category of disability.

Service Delivery: The educational placement of students with learning disabilities continues to be a significant issue in the field of learning disabilities. The percentage of children who spend more than 60% of their day outside the regular classroom decreased from 17% in 1996 to 11% in 2005. Today, a majority of students with learning disabilities spend much of their day in the general education classroom. However, this issue is controversial as some people view the inclusion movement as a reduction of instructional services to students with learning disabilities and a threat to the area of learning disabilities within the educational structure. To others, inclusion represents an opportunity for students with learning disabilities to function successfully in a community of diverse learners without the stigmatization of being segregated. Another issue is the lack of an acceptable definition for ‘learning disabilities’. According to Lyon(1995), the field of learning disabilities still lacks definitions that are logically

consistent, easily operationalized and empirically validated. Furthermore, learning disabilities assessment remains an area of concern, debate and change. Despite the abundance of standardized commercial tests there is still a lack of reliable, valid and instructionally relevant tests. Many authorities are recommending that more time be devoted to instruction and less time to assessment and curriculum based assessment appears to be gaining in use.

National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children Definition: The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) gave the following definition; “Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written languages. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling or arithmetic. They include conditions, which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain disfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. they do not include learning problems, which are due primarily to visual, hearing or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance or to environmental disadvantage.”

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Definition: the IDEA regulations in the 2006 Code of Federal Regulations, which are based on the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA state, “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, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage.”

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities Definition: The NJCLD gave the following definition in 1981, “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.”

Association for Children with Learning Disabilities Definition: The leaders of the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (1986) rejected the NJCLD definition and wrote their own definition: “Specific Learning Disabilities is a chronic condition of presumed neurological origin that selectively interferes with the development, integration, and/or demonstration of verbal and/or non verbal abilities. Specific Learning Disabilities exists as a distinct handicapping condition and varies in its manifestations and in degree of severity. Throughout life, the condition can affect self-esteem, education, vocation, socialization, and/or daily living activities.”

Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities Definition: In an effort to improve the learning disabilities definition the ICLD included the following statement, “Learning disabilities refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading or writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities, or of social skills.” Thus, this definition allows an individual who has social difficulties and no academic problems to be diagnosed as having learning disabilities.

3. *Characteristics of Learning Disabilities*

Learning disabilities display the following characteristics:

- Discrepancy factor: A discrepancy exists when the estimated ability and the academic performance of a student differ greatly.
- Academic Learning Difficulty: Academic problems in written expression, basic reading skill, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, and mathematics problem solving.
- Language Disorders: Deficient skills in oral expression and listening comprehension. Students who do not read well may have underlying language problems.
- Perceptual Disorders: The inability to recognize, discriminate and interpret sensation esp. visual and sensory disabilities.
- Metacognitive Deficits: Lack of awareness of his or her own thought processes and lack of ability to use those cognitive processes to learn.
- Social-emotional problems: Frustration with learning difficulties leads them to act disruptively and acquire negative feelings of self worth. Behavioral and social skill problems are also common among students with learning disabilities.
- Memory Problems: Students with learning disabilities often have difficulty remembering auditory and visual stimuli and research suggests that they have deficits in working memory.
- Attention Problems and Hyperactivity: They exhibit short attention spans, distractibility and hypersensitivity. They are unable to screen out extraneous stimuli and are attracted by irrelevant stimuli.

4. *Heterogeneity of Learning Disabilities*

Students with learning disabilities are diverse in character and therefore, some may show discrepancy in only one identification criteria among the guidelines listed by IDEA while some may show discrepancies in all areas. Moreover, many professionals agree that there is a much broader range of learning disability characteristics beyond those included in the identification criteria. The heterogeneity of learning disabilities does not imply that a different treatment is necessary for each individual. Explicit instruction, learning strategies, cooperative learning, direct instruction and behavioral interventions are effective among students with all types of characteristics.

5. *Prevalence of Learning Disabilities*

Some critics have blamed the rapid increase of learning disabilities on faulty assessment practices, Hallahan (1992) claims that the growth rate is understandable considering the newness of the learning disabilities discipline and the effect of social and cultural factors. As learning disabilities have been researched for about the past 30 years, people have become more aware in recognizing the disability as well as how to deal with it. He also said socio-cultural influences such as poverty, teenage motherhood, drug abuse etc. have played a role in the increase of learning disabilities.

6. *Learning Disabilities and Gender*

Disproportionate representation of males and females in special education has been an issue for many years. Specifically, females are often underrepresented, and males are typically overrepresented, with ratios ranging from 2:1 to 4:1. Some authorities believe that disproportionate representation is a result of bias in the identification procedure. Efforts must continue to prevent the misidentification of students with learning disabilities.

7. *Learning Disabilities Across Cultures*

Within the United States, professionals are aware that learning disabilities exist among individuals across cultures. African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans are the primary ethnic groups represented in U.S. schools. It is recognized that a student is likely to face learning difficulties when the customs or values of the school personnel differ from those of the student. These learning problems are complicated further if the student has a learning disability or if the student's primary language is different from the primary language of the school personnel.

8. *Perspective*

Special education history reflects much concern about assigning labels such as 'learning disabilities' to individuals. This has positive and negative connotations. On the negative

side, these descriptors provide the labeled individuals with reasons or excuses for failure or may result in professionals and parents lowering their positive expectations of the labeled individual. On the positive side, labels such as 'learning disabilities' foster scientific inquiry, advance knowledge and promote better communications among stakeholders. These days the focus is on person-first terminology e.g. "individual with learning disabilities" rather than "learning disabled individual". It is hoped that this approach will encourage the perspective that people with disabilities are not very different from people without disabilities. Disability is only one facet among many other strengths and capabilities that an individual possesses.