Editor's Comment:

One of the most important issues in the field today relates to the definition of learning disabilities. Professionals and parents have discussed and debated this subject since 1962. In the following article, Dr. Donald Hammill observes that much progress has been made over the years in defining learning disabilities. He concludes that of the currently available definitions, the one developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities is the most precise and acceptable. Readers' comments on this critical issue, as "Letters to the Editor" or "Forum" articles, are encouraged and will be printed as space permits. —JLW

On Defining Learning Disabilities:
An Emerging Consensus

Donald D. Hammill

This article reviews the efforts made since 1962 to define learning disabilities, provides readers with a clear picture of the current status of such definitions, and recommends that a consensus form around the definition proposed by the NJCLD.

Few topics in the field of learning disabilities have evoked as much interest or controversy as have those relating to the definition of the condition. Beginning in 1962 with Samuel Kirk's first effort to define the term, and continuing to the present, professionals, parents, and governmental agents have tried to develop a valid and widely acceptable definition. This article reviews these efforts, provides readers with a clear picture of the current status of learning disabilities definitions, and recommends that a consensus form around the definition proposed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD).

First, the distinction must be made between conceptual and operational definitions of learning disabilities. A conceptual definition is a statement that describes learning disabilities theoretically. As such, it is a first step toward the development of an operational definition that can be used in everyday situations to identify people who have learning disabilities. Conceptual definitions are important because one must have a clear idea of what learning disabilities are before one can identify them in individuals. This paper focuses exclusively on conceptual definitions of learning disabilities.

The article has six parts. The first part explains why definitions are important. The second part describes the procedures used to identify the various definitions that are or have been influential in the learning disabilities field. A set of definitional elements (i.e., characteristics on which definitions might differ) is presented in the fourth section. In the fifth part, the definitions are compared according to these definitional elements. The final section is devoted to conclusions.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEFINITIONS IN LEARNING DISABILITIES

According to the Random House Dictionary of the English Language (Stern, 1967), the word define means to state the meaning of, to explain the nature or essential qualities of, to determine the boundaries of, or to make clear the form of something. From that perspective, proper definitions become essential if one is ever to know anything fully and completely. Socrates taught that real knowledge can be obtained only through absolute definition; if one cannot define something absolutely, then one does not really know what that something is (Stone, 1988). But Socrates also believed that people are inherently incapable of formulating ultimate definitions and therefore can never attain true and complete knowledge of anything. Yet, most of the Socratic dialogues recorded by Plato and Xenophon dealt with his efforts to define diverse terms. Obviously, even though they may be out of our reach, ultimate definitions are vital to pursue because they lead to better, if not total, knowledge of a particular subject.

Precise definitions of handicapping conditions, for example, provide solid rationales for generating theories, formulating hypotheses, classifying disorders, selecting subjects, and communicating with others. Accordingly, study of a field cannot begin in earnest until interested individuals have agreed on the definitions of the essential concepts that relate to that field. For example, everyone would immediately agree with the assertion by Socrates that a person could not possibly make a pair of shoes unless he or she first had a definite idea about the nature of shoes. By the same token, it is hard to understand how a professional could successfully identify, diagnose, prescribe treatment for, teach or remediate, motivate, or generally improve the life of a person who has a learning disability without first having a clear and accurate idea of the nature of a learning disability. At the very least, knowledge about the nature and characteristics of learning disabilities is certainly no liability for a professional working in this field.

A widely accepted definition of learning disabilities is essential to the future well-being of our field. Currently, without such a definition, professionals, parents, and legislators are confused, first about who does and does not have a learning disability, and then about whether such a thing as a learning disability even exists. Because of this confusion, many professionals working in the learning disabilities field recognize the need for reaching a consensus on a definition. In fact, as noted previously, the field has been wrestling with definitional issues since 1962, when Kirk first defined the
term. Since then, we have made steady and considerable progress toward agreement on a definition; evidence of this progress is presented in this article.

IDENTIFYING PROMINENT DEFINITIONS

To establish which definitions have had the greatest influence on our field, 28 recent editions of textbooks that deal with learning disabilities were consulted. These books were generally representative of introductory or methods texts used in teacher training programs. All of the books were published between 1982 and 1989. Nineteen discussed how learning disabilities are or should be defined. The authors whose work includes discussions of definitions and definitional issues are Adelman and Taylor (1983, 1986); Bryan and Bryan (1986); DeRuiter and Wansart (1982); Gearheart and Gearheart (1989); Hallahan, Kauffman, and Lloyd (1985); C. Johnson (1981); D. Johnson and Blalock (1987); S. Johnson and Morasky (1980); Kavale, Forness, and Bender (1987); Kirk and Chalfant (1984); Lerner (1989); Lewis (1986); Lovitt (1989); Mercer (1987); Myers and Hammill (1982); Roswell and Natchez (1989); Siegel and Gold (1982); Sutaria (1985); and Wallace and McLoughlin (1988). These sources refer to a total of 11 different definitions that are prominent today or that experienced some degree of popularity at one time.

THE DEFINITIONS

The 11 definitions are discussed briefly in this section. Each discussion includes a short history of how and why the definition was proposed, the basic ideas incorporated within it, and the degree of influence the definition had on the field.

Kirk's Definition

A learning disability refers to a retardation, disorder, or delayed development in one or more of the processes of speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic, or other school subjects resulting from a psychological handicap caused by a possible cerebral dysfunction and/or emotional or behavioral disturbances. It is not the result of mental retardation, sensory deprivation, or cultural and instructional factors. (Kirk, 1962, p. 263)

Kirk (1962) offered this definition in the first edition of his popular textbook, Educating Exceptional Children. The definition was further sanctioned after the publication of a widely read article by Kirk and Bateman in a 1962 issue of Exceptional Children.

According to Kirk's definition, learning disabilities are process problems that affect the language and academic performance of people of all ages. The cause of the problems is centered in either cerebral dysfunction or emotional/behavioral disturbance.

Siegel and Gold (1982) reported that this definition was used at the 1963 meeting wherein the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (now called the Learning Disabilities Association of America) was first organized. According to Sutaria (1985), Kirk no longer considers this definition to be valid. Kirk's current ideas are probably better reflected in the definitions written by the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) (1968) and the United States Office of Education (USEO) (1977).

Bateman, also dissatisfied with this definition, advocated a very different version in 1965.

Bateman's Definition

Children who have learning disorders are those who manifest an educationally significant discrepancy between their estimated intellectual potential and actual level of performance related to basic disorders in the learning process, which may or may not be accompanied by demonstrable central nervous dysfunction, and which are not secondary to generalized mental retardation, educational or cultural deprivation, severe emotional disturbance, or sensory loss. (Bateman, 1965, p. 220)

Bateman's definition differed markedly from the one she coauthored with Kirk in 1962: The idea of aptitude-achievement discrepancy was introduced, no statement pertaining to cause was included, the emphasis was on children, and no examples of specific learning disabilities were provided.

According to this definition, learning disabilities are associated with process problems that lead to unspecified difficulties for underachieving children. This definition was worded vaguely and did not gain the level of acceptance obtained by the Kirk definition. Bateman (personal communication, June 20, 1989) soon ceased to advocate this definition and today disagrees with many of its elements.

The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children Definition

Children with special (specific) learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken and written language. 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 dysfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do not include learning problems that are due primarily to visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantage. (NACHC, 1968, p. 34)

The NACHC, a creation of the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped within the U.S. Office of Education (USEO), was initially headed by Samuel Kirk. Its first annual report on January 31, 1968, included a definition of learning disabilities (NACHC, 1968). Not surprisingly, this definition was similar conceptually to Kirk's (1962), with three important exceptions: (a) Emotional disturbance was dropped as a stated cause for learning disabilities, (b) the learning disability condition was restricted to children, and (c) thinking disorders were added to language and academic problems as further examples of specific learning disability. Without a doubt, this was the seminal definition of learning disabilities, for it was the basis for the 1977 USOE definition that was incorporated into Public Law 94-142.

The Northwestern University Definition

- Learning disability refers to one or more significant deficits in essential learning processes requiring special education techniques for remediation.
- Children with learning disability generally demonstrate a discrepancy between expected and actual achievement in one or more areas such as spoken, read, or written language, mathematics, and spatial orientation.
The learning disability referred to is not primarily the result of sensory, motor, intellectual, or emotional handicap, or lack of opportunity to learn.

Significant deficits are defined in terms of accepted diagnostic procedures in education and psychology.

Essential learning processes are those currently referred to in behavioral science as involving perception, integration, and expression, either verbal or nonverbal.

Special education techniques for remediation refer to educational planning based on the diagnostic procedures and results.

(Kass & Myklebust, 1969, pp. 378–379)

In an attempt to resolve the problems arising from too many diverse definitions, the USOE funded an Institute for Advanced Study at Northwestern University and charged its 15 participants with preparing a definition of learning disabilities that would be most advantageous for special education. The participants were H.R. Myklebust (Chair), S. Ashcroft, F.X. Blair, J.C. Chalfant, E. Deno, L. Fleigler, P. Hatlen, H. Heller, F. Hewett, C. Kass, S. Kirk, R. Ridgeway, H. Selznick, J. Taylor, and W. Wolfe. The proceedings of the institute were reported by Kass and Myklebust (1969) in an article in the Journal of Learning Disabilities.

The definition that emerged differed from that of the NACHC in several important ways. First, the idea of aptitude-achievement discrepancy, articulated earlier by Bateman, was inserted into the definition. Second, no cause for learning disabilities was hypothesized. Third, thinking disorders were not listed among the examples of learning disabilities. Fourth, “disorders of spatial orientation” were mentioned for the first time and only in any definition of examples of specific learning disabilities.

This definition may have served as the basis for the development of the 1967 USOE definition. With the exception of the curious inclusion of “spatial orientation” problems, the ideas expressed in the two definitions are identical. The aptitude-achievement discrepancy concept in the institute’s definition could have legitimated the inclusion of the IQ-achievement discrepancy formula in the 1976 USOE definition. Also, the conference that developed this definition was called for and funded by the USOE for the express purpose of resolving the definitional issue. At the time, many professionals suspected that the real reason an official definition was sought was to help impose a cap on the total number of students being classified as learning disabled. No similar effort was made by the government to define any other conditions specified in P.L. 94-142. It is safe to assume that, when called upon to recommend an official definition years later, someone in the USOE would remember the Northwestern definition.

The CEC/DCLD Definition

A child with learning disabilities is one with adequate mental ability, sensory processes, and emotional stability who has specific deficits in perceptual, integrative, or expressive processes which impair learning efficiency. This includes children who have central nervous system dysfunction which is expressed primarily in impaired efficiency. (Siegel & Gold, 1982, p. 14)

In the late 1960s, a committee of the Division for Children with Learning Disabilities (DCLD), which was a unit within the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), tried its hand at defining learning disabilities. The result of this effort was unique in one important way: The definition did not allow children with learning disabilities to be multihandicapped. That is, regardless of their educational problems, mentally retarded, blind, deaf, and emotionally disturbed children by definition could not have learning disabilities. Of the 11 definitions reviewed, only this one specifically rejected the idea that learning disabilities could coexist with other handicapping conditions.

Information on this definition proved to be elusive. It was referred to briefly by Siegel and Gold (1982) and Sutaria (1985), but no details were provided about the authors of the definition or about whether the definition was ever accepted officially by either of the two organizations with which it was associated. Two different dates are used in citations for this definition: Council for Exceptional Children, 1967 and 1971. The 1967 citation refers to an unpublished working definition used by DCLD. The 1971 citation refers to CEC’s annual convention papers of that year. A search of the DCLD archives did not locate any information on the definition. Neither could CEC staff find any record of the 1971 convention papers. The fact that so little information about this definition survives is an indication that it was never widely accepted.

Wepman et al.’s Definition

Specific learning disability, as defined here, refers to those children of any age who demonstrate a substantial deficiency in a particular aspect of academic achievement because of perceptual or perceptual-motor handicaps, regardless of etiology or other contributing factors. The term perceptual as used here relates to those mental (neurological) processes through which the child acquires . . . basic alphabets of sounds and forms. (Wepman, Cruickshank, Deutsch, Morency, & Strother, 1975, p. 306)

The concern that too many diverse types of learning problems were being subsumed under a single label led to the development of at least one highly restrictive definition. In one of the position papers prepared by the National Project on the Classification of Exceptional Children, Wepman et al. (1975) proposed a new definition that limited learning disabilities to perceptual process-based academic problems.

Adelman and Taylor (1983) pointed out that the “elimination of exclusionary clauses and etiological considerations and restriction to perceptual functioning would undoubtedly reduce the types of persons likely to be labeled learning disabled” (p. 5). They concluded that to focus exclusively on perceptual correlates might be too limiting. Doubtless they were correct, for this definition also received limited acceptance.

The 1976 U.S. Office of Education Definition

A specific learning disability may be found if a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of several areas: oral expression, written expression, listening comprehension or reading comprehension, basic reading skills, mathematics calculation, mathematics reasoning, or spelling. A “severe discrepancy” is defined to exist when achievement in one or more of the areas falls at or below 50% of the child’s expected achievement level, when age and previous educational experiences are taken into consideration. (USOE, 1976, p. 52405)

In the 1976 Federal Register, the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped within the USOE attempted to improve the
NACHC definition by adding operational diagnostic criteria. The significant component in this definition is the sentence containing the definition of "severe discrepancy" because it led to the development of a formula for calculating a severe discrepancy between intellect and achievement.

Opposition to the formula formed quickly and it was heated in tone. Norman and Zigmond (1980) noted that critics attacked the formula for being mathematically unsound, claimed that its use selected students who were different from those being served, and asserted that its existence infringed upon states' rights. Mercer (1987) reported that when the USOE requested feedback, it received 982 mostly negative reactions to the proposed formula. Because of the large number of negative responses, the formula was dropped from later regulations. While some people were opposed to the particular formula proposed, others were opposed in principle to any use of so-called IQ-achievement discrepancy formulas to qualify students as having learning disabilities.

The arguments against the use of discrepancy formulas for identification purposes were probably best made in a position paper written by the Board of Trustees of the Council for Learning Disabilities (1986). The board listed eight substantial reasons for its objections and concluded that discrepancy formulas should not be used. Those reasons included questions about the psychometric adequacy of the test scores that were used in the formulas, and concerns that the formulas actually identified many nonlearning-disabled persons while disqualifying many individuals who obviously had learning disabilities.

Though the USOE deleted this formula from its subsequent (1977) definition, many states seized on the idea of aptitude-achievement discrepancy and subsequently designed and implemented their own formulas. Today, the value of these discrepancy formulas is one of the most hotly disputed issues in the field of learning disabilities.

The 1977 U.S. Office of Education Definition

The term "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, 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 disabilities which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (USOE, 1977, p. 65083)

Gearheart and Gearheart (1989) pointed out that during a House subcommittee hearing on P.L. 94-142, concern was expressed regarding the vagueness of the recommended definition of learning disabilities. The Bureau of Education for the Handicapped was instructed to find a better definition and to spell out precisely how children might be identified. Even though an extensive effort was made to build a more specific definition, no consensus was reached. Adelman and Taylor (1986) reported that, in the end, a compromise was worked out by the NACHC. The 1968 NACHC definition (with a few modifications) was adopted and incorporated into federal legislation in 1969; into P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975; and into the Reauthorization of the Education of the Handicapped Act of 1986. The 1977 date that is so often associated with this particular definition is the year it was published in the Federal Register.

In addition to the definition, a set of operational criteria was included in the Federal Register (1977) to guide efforts to identify students with learning disabilities. These criteria are curious in that they depart from the definition in several important and surprising ways. First, two prominent components in the federal definition were completely disregarded in the operational criteria. No criteria are provided for operationalizing either the process clause or the central nervous system (CNS) dysfunction component. These omissions probably indicate disagreement among those responsible about how to handle these two controversial elements. Second, the definition includes spelling among the specific learning disabilities, but it is missing in the criteria. Third, the definition implies that learning disabilities can exist at all ages, while the use of the word "children" in the operational criteria seems to restrict the condition to young students. The fact that the identification criteria differ so dramatically from the definition confuses the issue of the nature of learning disabilities and lessens the likelihood that the 1977 USOE definition can serve as the definition of learning disabilities.

Hallahan et al. (1985) suggested that this official definition is the most widely accepted today because it is the one under which federal programs are administered and because it has been adopted by most state education agencies. Mercer (1987) and Gearheart and Gearheart (1989) provide particularly comprehensive discussions of the 1977 federal definition and the criteria that accompany it.

Readers should keep in mind that the 1977 USOE definition and its operational criteria were developed for the somewhat limited purpose of guiding funding practices associated with federal school legislation. Consequently, the emphasis is on school-aged children and academic subjects. It is likely that no one ever intended for this definition to serve as a comprehensive theoretical statement about the nature of learning disabilities, to account for all learning disabilities, or to indicate all times during life when they might be present.

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities Definition

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. (NJCLD, 1988, p. 1)

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) is composed of representatives of eight national
organizations that have a major interest in learning disabilities. Member organizations include the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), the Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD), the Division for Children with Communication Disorders (DCCD), the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD), the International Reading Association (IRA), the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA), the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and the Orton Dyslexia Society (ODS). Approximately 225,000 individuals constitute the combined membership of these organizations. Readers interested in learning more about the history and mission of the NJCLD are referred to Abrams' (1987) overview.

Basically, the NJCLD representatives approved of the 1977 USOE definition but felt that it could be improved. In particular, some ambiguities resulting from the discrepancies between the definition and its operational criteria needed to be reconciled. It was also thought that the language of the 1977 definition could be clearer and more specific.

The reasons for these changes were spelled out in a position paper (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1981) and summarized by Hammill, Leigh, McNutt, and Larsen (1981). Briefly, the NJCLD thought an improved definition should (a) reinforce the idea that learning disabilities could exist at all ages, (b) delete the controversial phrase basic psychological processes, (c) draw a distinction between learning disabilities and learning problems, and (d) make clear that the "exclusion clause" did not rule out the coexistence of learning disabilities and other handicapping conditions.

After several years of study and debate, the representatives of the NJCLD unanimously approved the definition and in 1981 sent it to their respective organizations for consideration. The definition was subsequently accepted by all the organizations except LDA.

In 1988, the NJCLD modified its earlier definition to reflect the current state of knowledge relative to learning disability and to react to the definition developed by the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (ICLD). The ICLD definition is discussed later in this paper. The revised NJCLD definition distinguished between learning disability and nonverbal disabilities such as those relating to social perception and self-regulatory behavior, reinforced the idea that learning disabilities occurred across the life span, and changed the wording of several points to make them more precise.

To date, ASHA, CLD, DCDD, IRA, NASP, and ODS have voted to adopt the definition; LDA has voted no; DLD has voted to abstain from voting on the issue. Under the rules of the NJCLD, the 1988 definition has secured the necessary number of adoptions and is now the official definition of the NJCLD.

The NJCLD definition, because of its broad support by the professional organizations, and the 1977 USOE definition, because of its official legislative status, are the most widely accepted definitions in use today. They share many elements; in fact, the NJCLD definition is in many ways an extension of the federal effort.

The Learning Disabilities Association of America Definition

Specific Learning Disabilities is a chronic condition of presumed neurological origin which selectively interferes with the development, integration, and/or demonstration of verbal and/or nonverbal abilities. Specific Learning Disabilities exist as a distinct handicapping condition and vary in its manifestations and in degree of severity. Throughout life, the condition can affect self esteem, education, vocational, socialization, and/or daily living activities. (AULD, 1986, p. 15)

After rejecting the 1981 NJCLD definition, the leaders of the LDA (formerly ACLUD) chose to write a definition of their own. This definition and an accompanying rationale appeared in a 1986 issue of ACLUD Newsbriefs.

It is difficult to determine from that article just what the framers of this definition had in mind. Their definition is in basic agreement with the NJCLD definition, but it differs in two important aspects. First, the definition fails to give any specific examples of the kinds of problems that can be classified as learning disabilities (e.g., problems involving reading, listening, writing, etc.). Instead, the definition refers rather obscurely to learning disabilities as problems of "verbal and/or nonverbal abilities." These terms are clarified in the rationale as follows: "VERBAL OR NONVERBAL ABILITIES: were chosen as inclusive terms to emphasize not only receptive and expressive language problems, but also the conceptual and thinking difficulties, the integrating problems and motoric problems" (ACLD, 1986, p. 15). The unusual punctuation, ambiguous vocabulary, and awkward sentence structure used in the rationale combine to make interpretation very difficult. In addition, readers are left completely in the dark about the meaning of "nonverbal abilities." Does nonverbal mean "social skills"? Are problems in math included or excluded? What are "integrating problems"? Did the authors intend to include "motoric problems" among the learning disabilities (e.g., the penmanship problems of students with cerebral palsy)?

The second difference between the LDA definition and most other definitions is the omission in the former of an exclusion clause. Without some sort of statement dealing with the relationship of learning disabilities to other handicapping conditions, one cannot tell whether or not the LDA definition recognizes the multihandicapped nature of learning disabilities. Can learning disabilities coexist with mental retardation, environmental disadvantages, emotional disturbance, and so forth; or does the presence of these conditions eliminate any possibility that a person also can be learning disabled? Neither of these questions is answered by the LDA definition as it is presently worded.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that an earlier, widely distributed draft of the LDA definition was printed in an article titled, "Definition of the Condition of Specific Learning Disabilities." This draft included a sentence that read, "Specific Learning Disabilities exist as a distinct handicapping condition in the presence of average to superior intelligence, adequate sensory motor systems, and adequate learning opportunities" (ACLD, 1985, p. 1). This statement clearly indicates that a person with a learning disability cannot be multihandicapped. However, the sentence was deleted from the definition before final approval by the LDA Board and Delegate Assembly in March 1986. Unfortunately, the draft version containing the sentence has been widely reprinted and
is cited in popular textbooks by Adelman and Taylor (1986), Bryan and Bryan (1986), Gearheart and Gearheart (1989), Hallahan and Kauffman (1988), Lerner (1989), Lovitt (1989), Mercer (1987), and Roswell and Natshape (1989). Not a single textbook that was reviewed for this study included a discussion of the correct LDA definition. The fact that the LDA definition receiving the most public exposure right now is not LDA's official statement (and actually is markedly different from it) cannot help but confuse professionals and parents.

While the LDA definition has some good qualities, it is not a serious contender to replace either the NJCLD or the 1977 USOE definition. Its wording is vague in critical areas, which prevents readers from formulating a precise conception of learning disabilities. With the exception of LDA members who read the 1986 ACLD Newsbriefs, most professionals and students in training probably know only the draft definition and are not even aware that a considerably different final version exists.

**The Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities Definition**

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, or of social skills. 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), with socioeconomic influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), and especially attention deficit disorder, all of which may cause learning problems, a learning disability is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1987, p. 222)

This effort to design an improved definition for learning disabilities was made by the Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities (ICLD) in 1987. This committee included representatives of 12 agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education. The definition, which the committee proposed in a report sent to Congress, is “a modification of” the NJCLD definition (ICLD, 1987, p. 222). The only substantive change that was made to the NJCLD definition was the addition of social skills to the list of specific learning disabilities.

The response to this alteration was swift. While agreeing that a person with a learning disability might also experience social problems, Silver (1988) asserted that “someone with significant difficulties with social skills but without deficits in one or more of the other six areas should not be considered learning disabled” (p. 79). (The six areas referred to by Silver are those spelled out in the 1977 USOE criteria.) Gresham and Elliott (1989) also questioned the desirability of considering social skill deficits to be primary learning disabilities. They further claimed that the evidence for viewing social skill deficits as primary learning disabilities was inconclusive and neither supported nor refuted by research.

The reaction from the NJCLD was more pointed. The role of social skills had been debated by them for years and, for a majority of the representatives, the issue had long been settled. Most of the NJCLD committee members did not view the insertion of “social skills” into its definition as an improvement. This was indicated in an official letter by Stan Dublinske, chairperson of the NJCLD, to Duane Alexander, director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Portions of the March 2, 1988, letter are reproduced below.

. . . The NJCLD was pleased that its 1981 definition provided the basis for the Interagency Committee’s proposed definition. However, after considerable discussion of the proposed definition, the member organizations of NJCLD voted 7–1 to support the original NJCLD definition. Of particular concern was the addition of the phrase “or social skills” to the definition.

While the NJCLD does not support addition of the phrase “or social skills” to the definition, we do support efforts to clarify the relationship between learning disability and social learning problems. We recognize that learning disabilities may significantly affect the individual’s patterns of social development and interaction, self esteem and activities of daily living. However, the NJCLD does not support the argument that these problems of social and personal adaptation constitute a separate and unique learning disability.

We also are concerned that the designation of social skills as a separate manifestation of learning disability invites the inclusion in the category of individuals with significant psychiatric illness. Such an inclusion will only complicate problems relating to identification, diagnosis and intervention of children, youth, and adults with learning disabilities. (S. Dublinske, personal communication, March 2, 1988)

One should not assume that, because it was developed by a governmental committee, this definition had any broad-based official standing. On the contrary, Gresham and Elliott (1989) pointed out that the Department of Education has not endorsed the proposed definition, for three pragmatic reasons. The Department maintains that including social skills in the definition would (a) require a change in P.L. 94-142, (b) increase confusion concerning eligibility, and (c) increase the number of children classified as learning disabled. The position of the Department of Education is found on page 222 of the ICLD (1987) report. For these and other reasons, this definition will probably never obtain either official status or professional acceptance.

**ELEMENTS BY WHICH DEFINITIONS MIGHT BE CONTRASTED**

Having identified and described the prominent definitions, the next step was to identify important conceptual elements on which the definitions might differ. Studying of the 11 definitions revealed nine elements that might discriminate among them.

1. **Underachievement Determination**

All the definitions reviewed adhere to the idea that an individual with learning disabilities is an underachiever. They do this in one of two ways. Some definitions imply by their wording that a state of underachievement exists when a person evidences uneven patterns of development (i.e., a person is appreciably better in some skills/abilities than in others). The authors of these definitions refer to problems in “one or more” abilities, to “specific” rather than general deficits, to “deficiency in a particular problem area,” and so forth. This idea is consistent with Gallagher’s (1966) reference to “develo-
mental imbalances,” to Kirk’s (1962) reference to “discrepancies in growth,” to Woodcock’s (1984) reference to “intracognitive and intracheatment discrepancies,” and to Kirk and Chalfant’s (1984) reference to “intraiindividual differences.” Thus, underachievement can be determined by the study of intraiindividual ability differences. For example, underachievement (and potential learning disabilities) might be verified by observing that a person is good in reading and relatively poor in math.

Other definitions suggest that underachievement is indicated by the presence of attitude-achievement discrepancies. Here a significant difference between intellectual ability (usually represented by an IQ) and performance in one or more of the learning disability areas is indicative of underachievement. For example, a difference between an IQ and a quotient from a reading test demonstrates underachieving performance and thus the possible presence of a learning disability. Obviously, the use of attitude-achievement discrepancy is a special application of the intraiindividual ability approach.

2. CNS Dysfunction Etiology

Some definitions specify that the cause for the learning disability is known or suspected to be the result of a problem in the central nervous system (CNS). Other definitions are silent on the etiological issue.

3. Process Involvement

Some definitions express the idea that, regardless of the learning disability’s cause, its effect is to disrupt the psychological processes that make proficient performance possible in some skill or ability area. Other definitions make no mention of process dysfunction.

4. Being Present Throughout the Life Span

Most definitions imply that learning disabilities can be present at any age. The definitions do this by avoiding language that would lead the reader to think otherwise. Generally, the authors of such definitions begin their statements with, “The term learning disabilities . . .” or, “Learning disabilities are . . .” Other definitions limit learning disabilities to children, especially those of school age, and usually begin with, “Children with learning disabilities . . .”

5. Specification of Spoken Language Problems as Potential Learning Disabilities

Some definitions specify that spoken language problems (e.g., those involving listening and speaking) can be learning disabilities. Others do not single out spoken language problems.


Some definitions specify that certain types of academic problems (e.g., those involving reading, writing, spelling, or math) can be learning disabilities; others are silent regarding academic problems.

7. Specification of Conceptual Problems as Potential Learning Disabilities

Some definitions specify that certain types of conceptual problems (e.g., those involving thinking and reasoning) can be learning disabilities. Others do not address the subject of conceptual problems.

8. Specification of Other Conditions as Potential Learning Disabilities

Some definitions specify that problems other than academic, language, or conceptual disorders can be learning disabilities. For instance, problems involving social skills, spatial orientation, integration, or motor abilities are mentioned.

9. Allowance for the Multihandicapping Nature of Learning Disabilities

Three scenarios exist within this element. First, the definitions may clearly indicate that learning disabilities can coexist with other kinds of handicaps (e.g., mental retardation, emotional disturbance, sensory and motor impairment).

These definitions generally make the distinction between primary and secondary problems. For example, in a blind child, the inability to read print is primarily the result of the inability to see. This same child could have a spoken language learning disability that was secondary to the blindness (i.e., it coexists with the blindness).

Second, definitions can have exclusionary clauses that are worded to eliminate the coexistence of learning disabilities with other handicapping conditions. According to these definitions, it would be impossible for a mentally retarded person to have a learning disability. Third, some definitions are silent on the issue.

CONTRASTING THE DEFINITIONS

The status of each of the 11 definitions regarding these nine elements was determined by studying the definitions (see Table 1). By comparing entries in the table, one may contrast the conceptual contents of the various definitions.

After documenting the characteristics of the 11 definitions relative to the nine elements, it was a simple matter to, next, compute the percentages of agreement among the definitions and to present these percentages in Table 2. Consider, for example, the definitions of Kirk and Bateman. In Table 1, one can readily see that the two definitions are in agreement on four elements (i.e., they both include a process clause, neither makes mention of thinking disorders, neither offers other examples of learning disabilities, and both adhere to the idea that learning disabilities can coexist with other handicapping conditions). Dividing the number of elements in agreement (four) by the total number of possible elements (nine) results in the percentage of agreement (44%) between the two definitions. The larger the percentage of agreement between two definitions, the greater their conceptual similarity.

Knowing percentages of agreement made it possible to note any clusters among the definitions. By reviewing the percentages reported in Table 2, one will note that only 10 are possible: 0, 11, 22, 33, 44, 56, 67, 78, 89, and 100. Therefore, 67% agreement was arbitrarily ac-
cepted as the criterion for a strong relationship. This percentage indicates that two definitions agree on six of nine definitional elements. Using this figure as the base, the following definitions were found to be strongly related: 1, 3; 1, 7; 1, 8; 1, 9; 1, 11; 2, 4; 2, 5; 2, 6; 2, 7; 3, 7; 3, 8; 3, 9; 3, 11; 4, 7; 5, 6; 6, 7; 7, 8; 8, 9; 8, 11; 9, 10; 9, 11; 10, 11. From these combinations, one can easily gather that definitions 2, 4, 5, and 6 form one cluster and definitions 1, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 form a second cluster.

The definitions that each cluster comprises are listed in Table 3, along with their status relative to the nine definitional elements. In addition, a composite that shows the status of the cluster relative to the elements is presented. Table 3 also contains the percentages of agreement among the definitions on each element. For example, the first cluster includes four definitions. According to data in Table 3, they all agree on three elements (process clause, life span, thinking); therefore, the percentage of agreement is 100 in those instances. A 75% agreement indicates that three out of the four definitions in Cluster 1 agree on a particular conceptual element. In the two cases where the definitions are split evenly, the percentage of agreement is listed as 50–50. With regard to the “multihandicapping” element in Cluster 1, two definitions held that learning disabilities could coexist with other conditions, one definition presented a view to the contrary, and one was silent on the topic. Since half of the definitions agreed, the agreement recorded was 50%. Agreement of 50% or less was taken to mean that no consensus existed among the definitions in the cluster.

Cluster 1 comprises the definitions proposed by Bateman, Northwestern, CEC/DCLD, and Wepman et al. A composite of the collective ideas expressed in these definitions would read as follows: *Children with learning disabilities suffer from basic disorders in the learning processes that enable a person to achieve.* This definition is painfully obscure and obviously unacceptable. It is easy to see why most professionals moved in the definitional direction indicated by Cluster 2.

The seven definitions that compose Cluster 2 are those of Kirk, NACHC, 1976 USOE, 1977 USOE, NJCLD, LDA, and ICLD. A composite definition based on these ideas would be nearly identical to those of Kirk, the NACHC, the 1977 USOE, and the NJCLD. By comparing the composite in Table 3 with the four definitions, one can note agreement on eight of the nine elements. This represents 89% agreement on critical definitional characteristics.

This cluster can be considered Kirk’s legacy to the learning disability definition. His influence, after framing his own definition, on the subsequent NACHC and 1977 USOE definitions was considerable. The NJCLD definition was merely an effort to improve on the 1977 USOE definition; and the more recent ICLD definition is nearly identical in language and thought to the NJCLD definition, with one very important exception—its inclusion of social skills.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definitions by cluster</th>
<th>Underachievement determination</th>
<th>CNS dysfunction</th>
<th>Process clause</th>
<th>Life span</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Academic</th>
<th>Thinking</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Allows for multihandicap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 1:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bateman (1965)</td>
<td>Aptitude-Achievement</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwestern (1969)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEC/DCLD (1967, 1971)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wepman et al (1975)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composite</strong></td>
<td>Aptitude-Achievement</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No/Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage Agreement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>50-50</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>50-50</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cluster 2:</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirk (1962)</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>NACHC (1968)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>USOE (1976)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>USOE (1977)</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>NJCLD (1981)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACLD (1986)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICLD (1987)</td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composite</strong></td>
<td>Intraindividual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td><strong>Percentage Agreement</strong></td>
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<td>86</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Definitions silent on this element.*

**CONCLUSIONS**

What can one conclude from this reflection on definitional issues in learning disabilities? Two conclusions seem obvious. First, and contrary to popular opinion, considerable agreement exists today among the definitions and definers. This is both surprising and encouraging. Second, of the current viable definitions, the one by the NJCLD is probably the best descriptive statement about the nature of learning disabilities.

**Consensus Is Near**

The fact that every important definition of learning disabilities currently enjoying any degree of popularity was found in Cluster 2 suggests that there is consensus in the field. Additional evidence of consensus is found in the relationship among the four definitions that have been developed since 1977 (USOE, NJCLD, LDA, and ICLD). Of these, the most influential definitions are the first two. They were the most frequently mentioned in the 28 texts reviewed for this article. The definitions by LDA and ICLD are recently formulated contenders set forth to correct perceived omissions or to clarify statements in the other two definitions. There can be no question, however, that the four definitions are in fundamental agreement on most issues related to the definition of learning disabilities.

In Table 2, the six percentages of agreement at the lower right (i.e., 78%, 56%, 67%, 78%, 89%, and 78%) represent the relationships among the recent definitions. The mean percentage of agreement is 74. These figures illustrate a strong relationship among the definitions and indicate that consensus is near.

**The NJCLD Definition Presently Is the Best**

Of the 11 definitions discussed in this paper, only 4 are professionally viable today (i.e., the 1977 USOE, NJCLD, LDA, and ICLD definitions). These definitions were consistently referred to in the 28 textbooks reviewed for this article. The remaining seven definitions have historical value only. Of the four viable ones, the definition written by the NJCLD has the best chance of becoming the consensus definition. This is in part because it has many good attributes, and also because the other definitions have problems that disqualify them as comprehensive statements about learning disabilities.

The main limitation of the 1977 USOE definition is its inclusion of a psychological process clause. Objection to the process clause is based on the term's lack of specificity and the suspicion that it might refer to the once-popular perceptual notions advocated by Frostig, Kephart, Getman, and others during the 1960s. Latter-day process-oriented professionals could make an argument that the current processing theories espoused by Ann Brown, Palinscar, Torgesen, Borkowski, Swanson, and Hallahan are more defensible than earlier versions and thereby deserve some consideration in a learning disability definition. If the new processing theories prove to be valid, useful, and capable of being operationalized, perhaps the NJCLD definition could be amended, or some new definition set forth at a later time. For the time being, however, it seems most
prudent to follow the example of the four currently viable definitions, which play down or delete the psychological process clause. The clause was not operationalized in the identification criteria accompanying the 1977 USOE definition, nor do any of the other three definitions include such a clause.

Another limitation of the 1977 USOE definition is the fact that it is inconsistent with its own operational criteria on several key points (see the earlier discussion of this definition). Because of these inconsistencies, the definition has diminished value as a precise, comprehensive, and descriptive statement about learning disabilities. In addition, the definition makes no mention of thinking disorders, which the other three recent definitions list as an example of a specific learning disability.

The main limitations of the LDA definition are its lack of clarity concerning which disorders constitute learning disabilities and its ambiguity about the multihandicapping nature of learning disabilities. Regrettably, most people's opinions about the LDA definition are based on an early published draft of the definition, which was never approved by LDA. While this unauthorized, and thereby useless, definition has enjoyed a wide distribution, relatively few professionals have encountered LDA's officially endorsed definition in the literature.

The main limitation of the ICLD definition is the inclusion of social skills in the listing of primary learning disabilities. Neither the 1977 USOE definition nor the NJCLD definition specifies social skills as learning disabilities; it is difficult to tell whether the authors of the LDA definition intended social skills to be an example of a specific learning disability. If they considered social skills to be a type of nonverbal ability, they should have stated this clearly instead of listing integration and motor problems as the only examples of nonverbal disabilities. With the USOES and NJCLD definitions omitting social skills, the LDA definition equivocal on the issue, and the Department of Education reluctant to endorse the definition, it is unlikely that the ICLD definition will receive wide acceptance in the years to come.

The NJCLD definition has many advantages, some of which have been referred to in this paper. It is also blessed with few liabilities, which is not the case with the other definitions. The percentages reported in Table 2 show that the NJCLD definition is strongly related to the other three current definitions (i.e., those of the USOES, LDA, and ICLD). It is at once everyone's definition and no one's. It was written by a committee that was the creation of ASHA, CLD, NASP, DLD, IRA, DCCD, LDA, and ODS. The definition is "owned" by the organizations that have officially adopted it and the individuals who have accepted it. This is very different from, and possibly superior to, a definition that is the creation of a particular governmental agency, association, or individual.

The NJCLD never intended to write the perfect definition, only a better one. A study of the definitions discussed in this paper suggests that the committee was successful in its efforts. The NJCLD definition has obtained a high level of acceptance among multiple national associations and individuals and is arguably the best one that is presently available. None of the NJCLD members believe that their definition has settled the issue for all time.

Political realities are such that the NJCLD definition may never replace the 1977 USOES definition in law. But this may not be important. What is important, however, is that professionals and parents unite around one definition so that we can say with assurance, "This is what we mean when we say learning disabilities."

For too long, textbook authors, researchers, and teacher educators in the area of learning disabilities have ignored the definitional issue by writing or talking about definitions instead of presenting and discussing a definition that they believe can be supported. For example, many textbook authors list, usually without any discussion, two or three definitions of learning disabilities. Often, all of these definitions take conflicting stands on important issues. The authors rarely tell their readers which definition is the most defensible statement about learning disabilities and the one around which they have organized the content of their book.

The evolving consensus on the definition of learning disabilities comes at an opportune time. Many professionals and others who want to cut services for individuals with learning disabilities cite the lack of agreement on the definitional issue as a justification. If professionals, parents, and governmental agents cannot find common ground in defining learning disabilities, then they might not long have a field in which to contest the issue. Without a common frame of reference (which a widely accepted definition provides), we are unable to decide who individuals with learning disabilities are or how they differ from others. Neither can practitioners justify their placement, diagnostic, funding, and treatment practices. The NJCLD definition provides a viable definitional umbrella under which all of us may find shelter. It may serve us well during the rainy days ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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REFERENCES


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