

Chapter 17

Specific Learning Disabilities: Reading, Spelling, and Writing Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses best practices in providing supports for students diagnosed with reading (dyslexia), writing (dysgraphia), and spelling (dysorthographia) deficits. It examines some impacts of these and associated conditions on learning. The recommended strategies for leveraging learning for the identified population are all evidence-based. Per the author, early intervention is key to providing students with learning disabilities a meaningful learning experience. An early intervention involves the use of multiple measures to diagnose a student's present level of performance primarily with a view to finding strengths (Strengths can be used to mitigate deficits) and learning gaps, utilizing evidence-based systematic instruction delivered with treatment fidelity, and an ongoing progress monitoring.

INTRODUCTION

A nation's ability to compete in an increasingly global economy depends on the quality of its labor force. Following Hanushek and Woßmann (2010) the quality of education, determined on an outcome basis of cognitive skills, has a considerable effect on economic development, although the macroeconomic effect of education relies on other complementary growth-enhancing policies and institutions. Education has the potential to reduce crime rate, increase productivity (Lochner, 2010), increase voter participation and civic awareness (Dee, 2010), equalize or disequalize inequality, promote human rights, increase life-expectancy; lower poverty; reduce public health, welfare, and prison costs, increase income, sales, and property tax receipts, yield positive environmental benefits, promote quality of life, and yield benefits to the larger society by the dissemination of technology from knowledge created by research and development in all academic fields (Blanden & Machin, 2010).

In the U.S. the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a product of international benchmarking and a consequence of the desire to improve educational and economic competitiveness, were created to guide instruction and learning in math and English language arts from kindergarten through 12th grade.

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Specific Learning Disabilities

The CCSS emphasize critical thinking and problem-solving skills, college- and career-readiness, and preparation for life in a technological society. The creation of these common standards has resulted in a paradigm shift whereby literacy development now, more than ever before, is predicated on a focused and coherent instructional approach by service providers working collaboratively. To that extent, the CCSS have become the fulcrum upon which the lever of instruction and learning must now pivot, and this comes with the expectation that they will have a longer shelf life than all their predecessors.

Although the CCSS stipulate grade-specific standards, they neither define intervention methods and materials nor proffer the supports necessary to leverage learning for struggling students. The additional challenge for service providers, therefore, is to close learning gaps by properly diagnosing needs or weaknesses and effectively matching them with evidence-based interventions.

Reading and mathematics skills are essential to success in many societies. However, not every child will start their academic career with the requisite literacy foundation. That notwithstanding, all students have a right to instruction that will help them rise to their full potential and service providers have a fiduciary duty to these and other students. The role of service providers is critical enough to warrant the multi-pronged approaches adopted by education systems to build and sustain capacity. This chapter focuses on best practices that can usher students with learning disabilities (LD) into a productive future.

The chapter examines:

- LD Definition
- Identification and Prevalence of LD
- Common Types of LD and Supports
- Some Associated Disorders and Supports

The concluding section reiterates the importance of early identification and intervention within the context of collaboration.

LEARNING DISABILITIES

The learning disabilities (LD) construct refers to a number of genetic, neurological, or injury-caused processing disorders that can hinder the acquisition of basic or higher level skills such as reading, writing, math, organization, time management, and abstract reasoning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2011; Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). These deficits may impede learning in individuals who otherwise have average or above average abilities. LD are different from learning problems because they are not caused primarily by social maladjustment, lack of motivation, inadequate or insufficient instruction, intellectual disability, environmental, cultural or economic factors.

Individuals with LD may appear to be bright and intelligent when in reality there is a gap between their potential and actual achievement. LD often result in academic underachievement with varying impact on functions and the extent of severity on an individual. However, there is conclusive evidence in the body of literature that, with the right supports, affected students can become academically and socially successful (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2011; Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; Jacobs & Fu, 2014; Nies & Belfiore, 2006; Richie, 2005).

LD is sometimes associated with negative psychological and psychosocial ramifications. For example, La Greca and Stone (1990) reported that, compared to classmates with low and average reading

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