

Washington State Association of School Psychologists Professional Practice Guidelines in the Evaluation of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities.

Background

Students identified as having a specific learning disability represent the single largest category of disability across the country. Depending upon which state is reporting, anywhere from one-third to one-half of the students receiving special education are reported to have a specific learning disability. The U.S. Department of Education (1994) reported an increasing number of individuals identified as learning disabled, rising from less than 2% of the total school population in 1976-77 to over 5% in 1992-93. Among the various providers of special education services there has been a continuing debate regarding the definition, theoretical perspective, conceptual framework and identification of learning disabilities. Despite the ongoing debate, evaluation groups are faced with the task of identifying students who are suspected of having a learning disability.

WAC Definition and Identification Procedures

The definition of learning disabilities in WAC-392-172-126 is the most widely accepted definition, since it is the federal definition and the one adopted by most states:

- (1) "Specific learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken language, or written language that may manifest itself in an 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.
- (2) 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.
- (3) All students being considered for eligibility for special education and any necessary related services under this category shall be evaluated in all areas of suspected disability in accordance with procedures in WAC 392-172-106 through 392-172-111 in addition to the procedures set forth in WAC 392-172-128 through 392-172-132.

WAC 392-172-128 describes the evaluation procedures;

"The group described in WAC 392-172-108 (2) (b) may determine that a student has a specific learning disability if:

- (1) The student does not achieve commensurate with his or her age and ability levels in one or more of the areas listed in subsection (2) of this section, if provided with learning experiences appropriate for the student's age and ability levels;
- (2) The group finds that a student has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas:
 - (a) Oral expression
 - (b) Listening comprehension
 - (c) Written expression
 - (d) Basic reading skill
 - (e) Reading comprehension
 - (f) Mathematics calculations
 - (g) Mathematics reasoning

- (3) The group may not identify a student as having a specific learning disability if the severe discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of :
 - (a) A visual, hearing, or motor impairment;
 - (b) Mental retardation;
 - (c) Emotional/behavioral disability; or
 - (d) Environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage;
- (4) At least one group member other than the student's general education teacher shall observe the student's academic performance in the general education classroom setting;
- (5) In the case of a student of less than school age or out of school, a group member shall observe the student in an environment appropriate for a student of that age;
- (6) Written documentation that the student has an academic achievement problem in the general education program shall be available. Examples of data used for documentation may include:
 - (a) Student performance on daily work and/or criterion-referenced tests;
 - (b) Summary of past performance;
 - (c) Group test results;
 - (d) Teacher observation and judgements; and
 - (e) Performance on state established standards;
- (7) Documentation of the existence of a severe discrepancy between the student's intellectual ability and academic achievement in one or more of the seven areas specified in this section shall be recorded. Such documentation shall conform to the requirements of WAC 392-172-132 and
- (8) Tests used to assess the student's intellectual ability and academic achievement shall be:
 - (a) Reliable as demonstrated by a reliability coefficient of .85 or above;
 - (b) Normed on representative national samples; and
 - (c) Selected and individually administered in accordance with the general requirements of WAC 392-172-106 through 392-172-108."

Washington has developed discrepancy tables for determining a severe discrepancy. Those tables are referenced in WAC 392-172-130 and are based upon the regressed standard score discrepancy with a criterion level of 1.55 standard deviations.

The method for documenting a severe discrepancy is addressed in WAC 392-172-132 and is outlined as follows:

- (1) A severe discrepancy shall be determined and documented from tables developed pursuant to WAC 392-172-130.
- (2) For the purposes of applying the severe discrepancy tables, the following scores shall be used:
 - (a) A total or full scale intellectual ability score;
 - (b) An academic achievement test score which can be converted into a standard score with a mean of one hundred and a standard deviation of fifteen; and
 - (c) A severe discrepancy between the student's intellectual ability and academic achievement in one or more of the seven areas provided for in WAC 392-172-128 shall be determined by applying the regressed standard score discrepancy method to the obtained intellectual ability and achievement test scores using the tables referenced above."

This section goes on to describe when professional judgement maybe applied. The use of professional judgement is outlined in the professional judgement section.

Selected Definitions

While the WAC definition refers to disorders in "basic psychological processes" there has been little historical agreement over how to define these constructs in the identification process. Recent developments have begun to suggest an emerging consensus among researchers about the nature of learning disabilities. Several groups have recommended that evaluation groups gather and document data in the areas of attention (focusing, sustaining, shifting), memory (working, short-term, long-term), executive control or functioning (self-regulation; selecting, monitoring, evaluating and modifying behavior and problem solving

strategies; predicting outcomes or consequences), language (phonological awareness, syntax, semantics, pragmatics) and concept development (formation, classification, relationships). As one example of the emerging consensus, an underlying phonological core deficit has been identified as major contributing factor with a majority students who have significant reading difficulties. Information gained from observation of these “processing” areas could assist with the development of interventions.

The Washington Approach to Determine a Severe Discrepancy

Regression equation. Washington adopted the regressed standard score discrepancy method, (one of the major forms of the, regression equation approach) in 1985. This method takes into account the regression-to-the-mean effects which occur when the correlation between two measures is less than perfect as well as the standard error of measurement of the difference score. Regression-to-the-mean is a real world phenomenon that has been consistently demonstrated on large psychometric samples of individuals. Students who are above average on one measure tend to be less superior on the other. Whereas those students who are below average on the first measure will tend to be less inferior on the second measure. A number of states that use some type of discrepancy approach have adopted this method. Limitations of this approach have also appeared in the literature. And those comments will be noted below.

Other Approaches to Determine a Severe Discrepancy

Deviation from grade or age level. This approach was used in Washington a number of years ago. This method is simply defined as the discrepancy between the student's grade equivalent score on an achievement test and his or her grade placement. This approach runs into difficulties in at least two areas: the use of grade equivalency scores and the fact that the same discrepancy means different things at different grade levels. A delay of one year has vastly different meanings at different grade levels. Secondly, grade or age equivalencies have few acceptable psychometric properties.

Expectancy formulas. This approach was adopted in Washington after elimination of the deviation from grade or age level. This approach attempts to include intelligence as a factor by calculating an expected grade equivalent. This calculation is usually based upon some type of ratio between the students mental age and chronological age. In essence the higher the IQ score the higher is the expected grade equivalent. This approach has several difficulties that make it unsatisfactory from a psychometric perspective. It assumes the correlation between the intelligence and academic measures is perfect, (1.0). This is not the case empirically. Secondly, this approach relies heavily on the mental age concept which has serious limitations as well as grade equivalency scores, which, as previously noted are problematic.

Difference between standard scores. With this approach, often referred to as the simple difference method, the achievement score is subtracted from the intellectual ability score. A criterion level for what is a severe discrepancy is often set in standard deviations, (for example one standard deviation between the academic achievement and intellectual ability score). From a psychometric and educational perspective this method has several limitations. It fails to systematically consider regression to the mean. It tends to identify greater proportions of students with higher ability scores. It will also tend to identify students as having discrepancies who in fact have average reading scores and tends to identify a fewer proportion of students who have very low reading scores. Despite these concerns a number of states have adopted this approach in defining a severe discrepancy,

Discussion on Discrepancy Approaches

During the 1984-85 school year the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, (OSPI) Special Education Division convened an LD Study group to review the existing Learning Disabilities identification process. This group conducted an extensive literature review of the above issues. During this time The United States Department of Special Education, Special Education Programs Work Group on Measurement Issues in the Assessment of Learning Disabilities (Reynolds, 1984) produced a report that recommended that regression procedures, specifically the regressed standard score method, be used to determine a

significant discrepancy. Following this review, (OSPI) adopted the regressed standard score method and set a criterion of 1.55 standard deviations below expected or predicted achievement values.

Use of the discrepancy approach has resulted in mixed reviews in the learning disability literature. Shaw et al. (1995) summarized the major concerns around the use of discrepancy models:

- ❑ "The variations in discrepancy formulas from state to state have resulted in inconsistencies in who is considered learning disabled.
- ❑ The use of discrepancy formulas does not allow for professional and informed clinical judgment.
- ❑ Discrepancy models focus on learning failure and deficits, requiring students to "fall significantly below their predicted performance potential... (p. 588)" before they can be identified for services.
- ❑ Discrepancy formulas do not address "the full scope of accepted conceptual definition of LD" (p. 588).

Many special education service providers have proposed that the discrepancy requirement "only provides a common "starting point" for more refined diagnostic efforts". (Keogh, 1988, p. 233) and that the discrepancy concept is a "legitimate part of LD" but is not sufficient in itself to identify a student with a learning disability (Kavale, 1987).

Use of discrepancy approaches has also been criticized in the literature for the following reasons:

- ❑ Not identifying a group of the lowest performing students.
- ❑ Research has identified a group of students not commonly determined eligible under the discrepancy approach. These students are not low enough in intellectual ability to be identified under the MR category, but who have significant academic delays.
- ❑ Different rates of progress. Discrepancy approaches typically fail to predict differential rates of academic progress. The presence or lack of a significant discrepancy does not predict rate of response to an academic intervention. Research has found that LD students with a severe discrepancy made equivalent progress to those students without a significant discrepancy.
- ❑ Different rates of instruction. Discrepancy approaches typically fail to predict differential rate of response to different instructional methods. The presence or lack of a significant discrepancy does not predict rate of response to different instructional methods.

In conclusion, while discrepancy methods represent an improvement over other methods of identification of learning disabilities, they suffer from significant limitations. Evaluation teams should consider the identified discrepancy as the common starting point in their evaluation process.

Factors to Consider in Addition to Discrepancy

As noted above, the discrepancy model in current use is necessary, but not sufficient for identifying specific learning disabilities or guiding appropriate intervention. Professional practice requires that evaluation groups not only identify that a discrepancy exists, but that they attempt to identify the nature of the severe discrepancy and the relationship to the learning difficulties. Investigation of the basic psychological processes is one step toward this identification. Once a discrepancy is noted, school psychologists should analyze the available data to attempt to discern a pattern of weakness that would indicate the nature of the problem. If available data is insufficient, a wide array of methods are available to further pinpoint the nature of the learning difficulty. For example, supplementary subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement-Revised (WJ-R) such as proofing, writing fluency, reading vocabulary, word attack, and quantitative concepts can be used to identify specific areas of academic weakness once a general discrepancy is noted using the standard battery.

Other tests, including the Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT) can be used to establish skills in reading rate, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. A number of tests of memory, such as the Wide Range Assessment of Memory and Learning (WRAML) or Test of Memory and Learning (TOMAL) can be used to identify the nature of processing deficits that contribute to the discrepancy between ability and achievement. The Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP) is another example of a recently developed measure to assess the students underlying phonological awareness and processing skills. It should be noted that this list of tests is not exhaustive. Use of this approach, going beyond the discrepancy, makes

assessment more informative in terms of the nature of the disability, and will be more useful in developing interventions and accommodations that will enable students to participate in general education programs.

Use of Professional Judgment

The use of professional judgment in the identification of students with learning disabilities is specifically outlined in WAC 392-172-132. Each WAC section will be quoted with implications discussed below: *"Where the evaluation results do not appear to accurately represent the student's intellectual ability and where the discrepancy between the student's intellectual ability and academic achievement does not initially appear to be severe upon application of the discrepancy tables in WAC 392-172-130, the evaluation group, described in WAC 392-172-108 (2) (b) shall apply professional judgment"*.

Implication: First, the evaluation group (which includes the parent and other relevant personnel identified in 108 (2) (b) (i)-(iv)) will conduct the evaluation and will use the instruments and procedures identified in "Identification of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities" (1998). If, after, applying the instruments and procedures outlined in the above document, a severe discrepancy has not been established and the evaluation group believes a severe discrepancy exists the evaluation group may use professional judgment. Professional judgments are often used when the evaluation group believes the intellectual evaluation results do not accurately reflect the students "true" intellectual ability. The most common example of this is found when a significant discrepancy exists between factor scores on the intelligence test (e.g. verbal-performance splits). While such splits are frequently statistically significant, they are not always educationally meaningful. For the WISC-III, while V-P splits of 11 points or more are statistically significant, they are also relatively common. For example, over one-third of the standardization sample (35.8%) had V-P splits of up to 12 points. For a split to reach a level of clinical significance (low base rate in the general population), splits must be 21 points or greater (9.3% of the sample or fewer).

Furthermore, Wechsler points out that the quantity of the split is not the only deciding factor. If, for example, both scores are within the average range (PIQ=109 and VIQ=90, 19 point split) and do not represent qualitatively different scores there is no discrepancy to resolve. Both scores represent average performance. Only when a low base-rate, quantitative and qualitative split between factor scores is readily apparent should a team consider discounting the full-scale IQ score. This is often done when there is an identifiable confound which skews one factor, such as limited language ability or clear visual processing deficits. In such cases, the team must then provide a data-driven alternative estimate of general intelligence to use to investigate a severe discrepancy. This may include alternate tests which avoid the perceived confound to accurately measure intelligence.

Additionally, the responsibilities of the evaluation group, according to the next section in WAC 392-172-132 are as follows: *"In this event, the group shall document in written narrative an explanation as to why the student has a severe discrepancy. The written narrative must provide supportive evidence, including procedures used to determine that a severe discrepancy exists between the student's intellectual ability and academic achievement."* This written narrative needs to document the procedures the Evaluation Team used to determine the presence of a severe discrepancy.

Teams may also apply professional judgment when the measure of academic achievement is judged to be invalid. This may result from lack of appropriate basals on test performance, which yields a score that may be artificially inflated. In such cases a team must find an alternative method of measuring/demonstrating academic achievement that can be used to identify a discrepancy. Non-tabled tests, such as the K-SEALS may be used if tabled tests are judged to give an unreliable or invalid score. Alternative assessments, such as curriculum-based measures of phonemic awareness skills, pre-reading skills, or reading fluency may also be useful data to demonstrate a discrepancy between expected and actual performance. Consistent with the instruments that have been tabled in "Identification of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities" (1998), evaluation groups should use only combined or cluster scores to determine the presence of a severe discrepancy in an achievement area. Evaluation groups may also need to consider standard error of measurement when determining the presence of a severe discrepancy.

Additional Factors to Consider

- ❑ For a student who has been retained, evaluation groups may wish to use both age and grade based comparison on the achievement measures when determining a severe discrepancy. Using this dual approach will assure that students who have been retained are being compared to their actual years of instruction.
- ❑ The observation that is required should provide evidence that the learning disability negatively impacts the student's ability to be successful in the general education program. In addition, the student should be observed in the area of the suspected disability (i.e., basic reading, etc.).

Exclusionary Factors

WAC 392-172-128 (3) indicates that the evaluation group for learning disabilities must attend to several exclusionary criteria. Evaluation groups must provide written documentation that: The severe discrepancy is not a direct result of or sustained by:

- ❑ a visual impairment or blindness
 - ❑ a hearing impairment or deafness
 - ❑ a motor or orthopedic impairment
 - ❑ mental retardation
 - ❑ an emotional/behavioral disorder
- (a) The evaluation group has considered the student's environmental and economic circumstances and agrees the severe discrepancy is not a direct result of or sustained by environmental or economic disadvantage.
- (b) The evaluation group agrees the severe discrepancy is not a direct results of or sustained by cultural and language factors.

WAC 392-172-10905 (2) indicates two additional factors that must be considered for all disabling conditions. "A student may not be determined to be a special education student if the determinant factor for that decision is":

- ❑ Lack of instruction in reading or math; or
- ❑ Limited English proficiency

Alternative Approaches in the Identification of Learning Disabilities

Several different promising practices have been suggested to improve the process of identification of learning disabilities. Each of these has support in the literature. This is not meant to be an all-inclusive review, but will instead offer some brief descriptions of the major concepts. One proposal is to evaluate intraindividual discrepancies. In this approach, evaluation groups identify significant difficulties in one or more of the following areas: listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, math and/or content area, and contrasts this weakness with strengths in the same areas.

A second proposal is for evaluation groups to extensively assess the "basic psychological processes" outlined above. In this approach school psychologists would assess the relative contribution of memory, attention, language, executive control, and concept development. Given the very convincing research base that supports the predominant influence of a language factor, i.e. phonological core deficit on students with reading difficulties, this is a promising direction.

A third proposal is for an alternative method of determining a severe discrepancy. This approach does not rely upon the results from an individually administered intelligence test and uses curriculum-based measurement (CBM), local normative data or criterion referenced information. Several states have this option presently available for evaluation groups. For example, in Iowa, teams may establish an expected

level of achievement by reviewing the student's age, current grade placement, and years in school, group achievement test results and achievement across content and skills areas. Then teams determine the presence of a severe discrepancy if:

- (a) the student is below the 12th percentile on CBM probes using local or regional norms or
- (b) the student is 2 or more times discrepant from same age peers on CBM probes using local or regional norms, or
- (c) the student is at or 50% below present grade level expectancy on criterion-referenced measures.

Supplementary Information

The National Association of School Psychologists has suggested that regardless of the evaluation model used, many students, (primary grades through high school) who are referred for an evaluation due to suspected learning disability fit the following diagnostic profile:

- Intelligence scores in the average range
- Listening comprehension subtest scores which are average
- Reading comprehension scores which are lower than the listening comprehension scores
- Spelling productions scores which are similar to, or less than, word identification scores
- Word attack subtest scores which are similar to, or less than, the word identification and spelling scores
- Phonological awareness skills which are well below average

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to provide guidance to evaluation groups for identifying students suspected of having a specific learning disability. The intent was not to provide a prescribed method for conducting the evaluation. Rather the focus is on providing further clarification on the use of the discrepancy approach, use of professional judgement, additional factors to consider and suggestions for future, alternative methods.

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