

Reprint

LEARNING DISABILITIES- A BARRIER TO LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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The Challenge

Literacy is the key to success in school and later life. Children who fail to learn how to read and compute in the elementary grades are most likely to fall behind and leave school. In fact, the largest category of students who drop out of school do so because they have fallen behind in reading. Their illiteracy affects not only their lives and that of their families, but society as a whole.

Literate societies have been found to have more stable governments, more productive economies, even healthier citizens. Indeed, literacy reflects the accomplishments of society. No longer can literacy be considered the simple ability to write one's name and read a few passages of the Bible as it was in the early 1900s.

Today, literacy requires being fully able to read, comprehend, and use the complex written information that drives and defines our fast-paced world. Yet for a large segment of our school population today, being mislabeled *learning disabled* has, in and of itself, become a barrier to literacy.

This was not the intent of the creators of the long-fought-for programs and statutes governing the education of the learning disabled. Nor was it the intent of educators and school officials dedicated to improving the basic skills of children at risk. It has, however, become a sorry factor of our nation's schools in the 1990s.

In 1976, a milestone was achieved with the passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act. No longer was American society going to ignore the educational needs, dreams, and rights of its handicapped children.

But much has changed. Teachers are being replaced by paraprofessionals, budgets are being cut, and reading achievement scores—which were climbing in the 1980s—are flattening out in the 1990s. At the same time, the number of handicapped children enrolled in our schools has grown dramatically, especially the subgroup of handicapped categorized as learning disabled.

The facts are clear. Fifty percent of the children who are labeled handicapped are categorized as learning disabled (NCES, 1995). Over the past ten years, the learning disability population has more than doubled (NCES, 1995). And nationally, students who are labeled learning disabled drop out of school at the rate of one out of every five students.

There is little question that learning disabilities form a distinct and special educational challenge in a modern society. But the International Reading Association is convinced that millions of children are intentionally being mislabeled as *learning disabled* in an attempt to gain some support for extra services for these children. As a result, children who are experiencing difficulties in specific subject areas are not being provided with the services they need to succeed in school. Unwittingly, our schools have thrown up a barrier to their literacy.

At the same time, the truly learning disabled children are losing the highly specialized, one-on-one attention they need to cope with their learning disabilities as special education classrooms become a dumping ground for more and more children requiring remedial help. The International Reading Association believes that all children should have an equal chance and the appropriate teaching to become literate. This report will raise several questions relating to the literacy education being offered to students who are labeled learning disabled, give examples of effective programs, and suggest changes in policy.

The Problem of Definition

The procedures outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for identifying a child who is learning disabled are quite clear. A child who is suspected of having learning disabilities is evaluated, a team reviews that evaluation, and a recommendation

is made. The process, however, breaks down at inception. The definition of learning disabilities is vague and has become even more so over the years (Mercer, 1990).

According to the 1977 criteria, a learning disability was defined as a neurological problem with an academic component. Now, most students who are identified for a learning disability placement are so identified because they are having difficulty in a specific subject area — a purely academic determination, made without reference to any physical impairment. Specifically, the vast majority of students who are suspected of having a learning disability are so evaluated because they have a problem in reading and/or computation.

Controversy surrounding learning disabilities is not new. As early as 1986, in reviewing the data on the growth of the learning disabled category, J.K. Torgesen stated the definition had shifted from one used to identify children who were suffering from a neurological difficulty to one based on the child's degree of academic success. In the nine years since this was written, the learning disabled population has increased to even greater size, although the total number of students in U.S. schools has decreased.

In 1989, Chalfant reported several key criticisms associated with the term *learning disabilities*. Included in this report are the lack of consensus as to what constitutes a learning disability, concerns about how effective special education programs are, and the fact that criteria for eligibility are unclear.

By 1993, even the U. S. Department of Education, in its Sixteenth Annual Report to Congress, reported it was beginning to look at the issue of why more students were being identified as learning disabled. In 1995 these problems remain unsolved.

The issue of defining learning disabilities also appears as a critical concern in the reporting of the *Learning Disability Quarterly* (Spring, 1990). The journal focuses on how states are using different criteria in defining learning disability. "According to current data, academic achievement remains basic to defining and identifying LD" (p. 148). Specifically, reading, writing, and arithmetic are included in the definition in 92 percent of the states.

The Problem of Placement

How can we best respond to the needs of a child who has a reading problem? Here the questions of labeling become critical: If the child is truly learning disabled, specialists trained in learning disabilities and reading can provide effective intervention. But if the child's problem is academic and not neurological, removal to a special education program may do more harm than good.

Today, the common practice is to place a student who is having difficulty learning how to read in a special education setting. This practice is believed to be beneficial for the student, but this type of placement may actually be hindering the ability of trained professionals to adequately serve the students in a cost effective manner.

Special education teachers are trained to teach special education students, and reading teachers are trained to teach students with reading problems. Special education teachers know how to respond to a student who has a problem processing information. In most cases, a special education teacher does not know how to handle a student who is having difficulty in a core content area.

This is where the problem begins. The data demonstrate that students who are having problems in the content area of reading are being misplaced in special education classes (Allington & Broikou, 1988, p. 806). Once they are placed in this type of setting they do not receive the style of teaching that would best suit their problem. In turn, students who are *lost* in programs that are ill-suited for them are dropping out of school at a higher rate than students who are in the general education program.

Pre-Referral Interventions

One promising solution is the trend toward using pre-referral interventions. Several states (among them Florida, Minnesota, Alabama, Kansas, and Maryland) now require a pre-referral intervention before any student is classified as learning disabled or placed in special education.

Pennsylvania is another state which is making a significant effort to provide students with a suspected learning disability an alternative to special education. This process, as outlined by the Pennsylvania State Department of Education, directs local schools to establish Instructional Support Teams made up of experts in instructional assessment, instructional adaptation, effective behavior management, and assistance for at-risk students. These teams are designed to assess and respond to the learner's needs and abilities rather than declaring the student handicapped. Since its inception, schools implementing the program report their referrals to special education have dropped 46 percent, as compared with schools which have not implemented the program.

Staff Development

A second area offering promise for meeting the needs of children at risk is staff development. Reading Recovery, an early intervention program for young children having difficulty beginning reading, provides an excellent example.

The staff development approach is integral to the Reading Recovery program. The goal of staff development is to give the teachers the ability to make effective decisions while teaching intensively (Pinnell 1990, p. 18). The teachers who participate in the Reading Recovery program prepare by participating in a yearlong course. At the start of their training, teachers take part in a thirty hour workshop (Pikulski, 1994, p. 37). The next step requires the teacher to attend an after school training session while also tutoring a student one-on-one during the school day (Pinnell, 1990, p.18).

Parts of this inservice training involves teaching a demonstration lesson behind a one-way glass while the rest of the teachers in training observe (Pinnell, 1990, p.18). Those who are observing are advised to talk to each other during this lesson. This process aids the teachers in sharpening their abilities to observe and to make decisions while they are actually in the process of teaching. After the completion of their year inservice course, they continue to increase their skills and knowledge through peer counseling and continuing contact sessions. The high success rate of this program is attributed to the extensive training of the participating teachers.

Another model of effectiveness may be found in the Chelsea schools in Massachusetts. In the schools, reading teachers are paired with the regular classroom teachers, who had also been given additional training. Both teachers then spend two hours a day working on reading instruction in these poor inner city schools. This technique effectively lowered the class size during reading instruction and provided children most in need with two highly trained professionals. The results have been significant. Yet, very few school leaders have focused on learning disabilities and literacy as an issue of teacher training and knowledge. What a teacher knows how to teach is critical to the potential success of the student.

Several other programs that emphasize staff development have been able to achieve success with students who are at high risk for reading failure. These include *Success for All*, the *Winston-Salem Project*, *Early Intervention in Reading*, and the *Boulder Project*. These five programs all use qualified, certified, and experienced teachers and teacher aides (Pikulski, 1994, p. 37). In fact, "Professionally prepared, accomplished teachers are the mainstay of successful early intervention programs" (Pikulski, 1994, p. 38).

Case Studies - Examples of Success

There are several examples of successful intervention programs for children who are labeled learning disabled. The first case study is of the Reading Recovery program. It is a program designed to help students who are at risk of failure in reading and would often otherwise have been identified as learning disabled. Reading Recovery (RR) is a program that effectively teaches children how to read. Not only does it reduce the number of children who are labeled with learning disabilities, but it also significantly reduces the number of children who are *retained* in remedial reading programs.

Reading Recovery is “an early intervention program . . . [that] enables the lowest-achieving students . . . to catch up to the average readers in their respective first grade and continue to learn with regular classroom reading instruction” (Pinnell, 1990, p. 118). Specially trained teachers instruct their students to become independent readers and to learn with enthusiasm.

The first program evaluation was for the school year 1984-1985. “The results of the RR program have been overwhelmingly encouraging. . . . [J]ust over 84 percent of the 15,663 Ohio first grade pupils who completed the Reading Recovery program reached the average reading level of their first grade classrooms” (Pinnell, 1980, p. 119). Consequently, the RR program has spread throughout the United States at a quick pace. Research has shown the RR program has lowered the number of low-progress first grade students who had been classified as learning disabled. In addition, it allowed educators to be more discriminating when classifying students who might need specialized instruction (p. 121).

The results are promising. The more effective teaching of trained RR instructors enables students to learn in less time than was previously required. Furthermore, it is a cost-effective program. “Placing children in the Reading Recovery program for 15-20 weeks of one-to-one intervention is far less expensive than placing them in a special education program for one year” (Pinnell, 1980, p.133).

Table 1

Reading Recovery Savings: Comparison with Grade Retention, Chapter 1 [Title I], and Special Education in the Elementary Grades

Intervention	Annual Cost	Program Length	Child/Cost
Retention (First Grade)	\$5,208	1 yr. 1,080 hours	\$5,208
Chapter 1	\$ 943	5 yr. 525 hours	\$4,715
Special Ed (LD)	\$1,651	6 yr. 1,512 hours	\$9,906
Reading Recovery	\$2,063	1/2 yr. 40 hours	\$2,063

Programs such as Reading Recovery are not only educationally effective but also cost efficient. In a report on the cost effectiveness of Reading Recovery (Allington & Walmsley, 1995), the savings were surprising when compared with other interventions: Title I (then Chapter 1), Retention in the First Grade, and Special Education (LD). In short, the early intervention program was found to be cheaper, shorter, and more effective.

Early Intervention Reading

Early Intervention Reading (EIR) is a program designed to supplement low-achieving first graders with a reading program that will allow them to develop as successful readers by the end of three school years. This program differs from the Reading Recovery program in that it does not require individual tutoring. Instead, it requires the regular classroom teacher to spend about 15 to 20 minutes each day with a group of the lowest-achieving students in the class. As a way of keeping the attention and enthusiasm of the students, the group participates in storybook reading. EIR emphasizes the teaching of phonics, writing, and repeated reading.

This Early Intervention Reading program has been implemented in many areas around the country, including St. Louis Park district, Missouri; White Bear Lake, Minnesota; and Osceola, Wisconsin. Through extensive research and case studies, the program has undergone some modifications. Teachers learned that although the EIR students remained as part of the whole classroom, the program was completely separate. Teachers found if they simply continue with the original reading lesson, students are more attentive and willing to learn. Another change has occurred in the teaching dimension of EIR. Previously, the classroom teacher was assigned full responsibility for implementing the program. Now, in many districts, there is a specifically trained EIR assistant who works part time with the small groups.

The results are encouraging. Well over half of the students who were originally in the lowest 20 percent of their class showed major improvements in their reading skills as measured by standardized tests. In addition, fewer children were being placed in learning disability classrooms, and their newfound reading skills remained with them throughout the second grade.

Although the results of EIR for individual students are not as dramatic as those of Reading Recovery (the difference is attributed to the fact that EIR does not provide extensive, one-on-one tutoring), the program has the ability to reach more children. In turn, more students learn to read. Additionally, the program is effective, inexpensive, and promising. Unlike other programs with similar goals, EIR “can provide many low-achieving first-grade students with the support they need to learn to read along with their peers” (Taylor, et al. in Allington, 1995, pp. 174-75).

Removing the Barrier

Children with problems in school are not benefiting by being classified as learning disabled, a label that suggests malfunctioning. The aforementioned programs all have something in common: they don't view the child as broken, but rather the system that has been provided to them as being the problem. When these students enter into Reading Recovery or Early Intervention, over 75 percent of them complete the program successfully.

Why isn't this the common approach? First of all, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) encourages schools to label children who need intensive help as being broken. The system is self defining and self monitoring. There are few (if any) requirements to report on the progress being made by students who are identified as being learning disabled.

The failure, then, is not of special education, teacher training, or of the child; it is a failure of policy. This can be changed, as noted in the Pennsylvania approach that supports a program of effective intervention. The federal statute must be changed to reflect this progress in thinking about how best to help children at risk. The growth in the numbers of learning disabled students is not a reflection of the number of children who have a perceptual or neurological problem that inhibits their learning; it is rather that the definition has come to mean a lack of progress in core academic subjects. The system has mutated badly.

We recommend that the Federal Government change its definition of learning disability to reflect the growth in understanding and the alternatives that are now available. The government

should require schools to attempt a high quality intensive intervention in the core academic subject that the child needs help in. We believe, after one year, 75 percent of the children at risk will be working at the level of their peers, and those who are helped in the early years will be able to participate in the other subject areas as well and will not be isolated further by their lack of skills. Only the remaining students are truly learning disabled and need the training and support of special educators.

It is our choice. Do we continue to offer programs that are inappropriate and contribute to our drop-out population? Or do we recognize the weaknesses in our current methods and do all we can to improve them? The choice we make now will have a profound effect on our children's literacy and our nation's future.

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