

LEARNING DISABILITIES

John J. McCormick, MA, MS

Introduction

Discussions concerning learning disabilities have taken place in Christian education circles for close to 30 years. Questions concerning the legitimacy of perceptual problems, psychological processing problems, memory deficits, and other innate problems abounded. The general consensus was that disabled students were simply not trying hard enough. After all, if a child could remember, in full detail, what took place several months or several years ago, then he could certainly remember the sounds assigned to letters, his math facts, a Bible verse, and the need to bring his homework to school on a consistent basis. Over the years, however, Christian parents, school administrators, teachers, and pastors have had experiences with young people who from all appearances seemed "normal" and "bright." Once introduced to the formal world of academics, however, these children began to exhibit learning and behavior problems.

Discipline for these children was approached in much the same manner as for other children. It seemed, however, that the discipline was more frequent and, at times, more severe. Teachers and parents spent more time working with them on their lessons. They would go over material several times attempting to force concepts into the child's understanding. They would even explain things louder in the event the child was not hearing what was being said, when in fact the child was hearing everything being said but just wasn't understanding it. These young people would memorize material before going to bed at night, but in the morning the material had vanished. In the child's mind, it was as though the material never existed.

Young people with learning disabilities are often misunderstood because those without disabilities cannot understand the way they think or the way they process information. The greatest challenge in special education is not in educating individuals with disabilities; the challenge is in educating individuals who do not understand children with disabilities.

Definition

The Federal Register defines a specific learning disability as:

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, think, 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 problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (December 29, 1977, p. 65083).

This definition was established in 1977 with the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. It was re-affirmed in 1990 with the passage of Public Law 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which is a renaming of PL 94-142.

Contained in the definition are certain factors that must be considered in order for a problem to be considered a legitimate learning disability. The factors include: (1) the presence of psychological processing problems; (2) problems that are intrinsic in nature; (3) problems that are manifest in academic areas; and (4) a discrepancy between ability and achievement.

Sutton and Sutton, in *Strategies for Struggling Learners* (1996), extract a fifth factor from the federal definition: a learning disabled student must have normal to above normal intelligence (i.e. IQ scores ranging between 85-115). This logically fits the criteria, for they state:

It is clear that normal to above normal intelligence sets students with true learning disabilities apart from other students who have learning difficulties which may be stemming from sub-average, low intelligence. . . students with mental retardation also have severe learning difficulties, but mentally retarded students by definition have intelligence quotients (IQ's) that are below 70 to 75 (1996, p. 7).

With this in mind, a closer look at the first four factors will be considered.

Psychological processing problems

Individuals with learning disabilities have difficulty processing information. Information placed in and retrieved from the brain is much like information

placed in and received from a computer. The first step is to make certain the computer is on. This is the same as getting a child's attention. When dealing with students with learning disabilities, nothing can be assumed. If one does not secure and maintain the attention of a student, then any attempt to enter information into the child's mind is fruitless.

Once the child's attention is secured, teaching may begin. After information is received, it is organized in a logical sequence, stored for later retrieval, then retrieved and outputted when needed. The problem with a learning disabled child is that somewhere in that process a glitch occurs. The child is not able to reproduce the information sequentially, logically, in its entirety, or at all.

Several things or a combination of things could happen during this process: through some input malfunction, the information may not have been received in its entirety (i.e., visual processing deficits and/or auditory processing deficits); the information may have been stored incorrectly; it may have been lost (forgotten) before it had the opportunity to be stored; or proper connections were not made to output the information.

Intrinsic in nature

As stated earlier in the federal definition, a learning disability includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The common element among these conditions is that they are within the individual. There is no external evidence that a problem exists, and so the term "hidden disability" can be used to describe a learning disability. Problems associated with mental retardation, blindness, deafness, physical handicaps, emotional disorders, or educational neglect do not meet the criteria of a true learning disability.

Manifestation in academic areas

"... a learning disability will manifest itself in one or more academic areas or in the achievement of a specific academic learning task" (Fichter, 1993, p. 215). If an academic area is not affected by the difficulties the child is experiencing then, the diagnosis of a learning disability will not be rendered.

IQ – Achievement discrepancy

Hallahan and Kauffman state, "An IQ– achievement discrepancy means that the child is not achieving up to potential as usually measured by a standardized intelligence test" (1994, p. 162). The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children– Third

Edition (WISC–III) is a formal test that is commonly used to determine a discrepancy between ability and achievement. The WISC–III provides performance, verbal, and full-scale IQ scores.

The number of points making up this discrepancy fluctuates from state to state.

The manner in which the criterion is met may fluctuate as well. The most common way to meet this criterion is by comparing a child's IQ score to his achievement score. For example, if the stated discrepancy is 20 points and the child obtains an IQ score of 105 and an achievement score of 84, the discrepancy between the two scores is 21 points. This being the case, the IQ-achievement discrepancy factor would be met.

Some states may also recognize a significant discrepancy between a student's verbal IQ score and his performance IQ score (full-scale IQ score is not a factor in this situation). A child may obtain a verbal IQ score of 80 and a performance IQ score of 105. A 25-point discrepancy exists between the two IQ scores. Assuming the same 20-point discrepancy factor and assuming the state accepts this approach, the child may also qualify for special education services.

Prevalence and Causes

The U.S. Department of Education in 1995 reported that more than 4% of all school aged children received special education services for learning disabilities (as cited in NICHCY, 1996). Out of the entire school population, over 2.4 million children diagnosed with learning disabilities were served during the 1993-94 school year.

Presently, no one truly knows what causes learning disabilities. There are too many possibilities to pinpoint their cause with certainty. A leading theory among scientists, however, is that learning disabilities stem from subtle disturbances in brain structures and functions (NICHCY, 1996).

Characteristics

Students who have learning disabilities may exhibit a wide range of difficulties. Their problems are not just limited to academics but carry over into other areas of life as well. Academically students may experience difficulty in the following areas:

1. Basic reading skills – Decoding skills, word attack, and recognition skills from simple alphabetic recognition to structural analysis of complex sentences. Reading is the number one problem for students with learning disabilities.

2. Reading comprehension – Interpretation and meaning of words, phrases, and sentences of written language.
3. Mathematical calculations – Basic facts and computation skills including problems using basic mathematical operations as well as other lower-order math skills. Math is the second most common area of academic difficulty for students with learning disabilities.
4. Mathematics reasoning – Ability to solve word problems in math and understanding the logic behind them.
5. Oral expression – the ability to express oneself orally with the proper syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of oral language.
6. Written expression – Handwriting skills, spelling, and writing skills.
7. Listening comprehension – Processing, remembering, and understanding oral language (Fichter, 1993).

Other traits that may be present include uneven and unpredictable test performance, perceptual impairments, motor disorders, and behaviors such as impulsiveness, low tolerance for frustration, and problems in handling day-to-day social interactions and situations (NICHCY, 1996). The problems may be mild, moderate, or severe. They do not outgrow their problems. They must learn certain strategies that will help them to compensate for their difficulties. Whatever the degree, the problems are real and if not addressed appropriately can and do lead to social, emotional, and spiritual problems.

Remediation

The following list of recommendations for remediation is by no means exhaustive. It provides general guidelines for accommodations that can be offered to the learning disabled student without significant inconvenience to the teacher.

- Make sure that the student's reading assignments are at his reading level.
- Teach the student phonics skills using a highly structured program that incorporates a strong tactile-kinesthetic component (Note: Research indicates that most reading disorders are caused by deficits in phonological skills. Therefore, a highly intensive phonics approach incorporating all modalities is recommended.)
- Use concrete objects and manipulatives to teach all new math concepts.
- Allow the student to use a calculator to check math calculations.

- Provide the student with a chart listing the steps for solving math word problems.
- Divide assignments into smaller increments.
- Allow the student more time to complete tests.
- Read tests to the student.
- Allow the student to answer test questions orally.
- Provide the student with prepared outlines rather than require him to copy notes from a chalkboard or overhead.

References

- Fichter, R. (1993). Learning disabilities. In J. P. Sutton (Ed.), *Special education: A Biblical approach*. (pp. 215, 216-217). Greenville, SC: Hidden Treasure Ministries.
- Hallahan, D. P., & Kauffman, J. M. (1994). *Exceptional children: Introduction to special education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Sutton, J. P., & Sutton, C. J. (1997). *Strategies for struggling learners: A guide for the teaching parent*. Simpsonville, SC: Exceptional Diagnostics.
- National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities. (1996). Learning disabilities. [On-line]. Available: http://www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/general_information/gen-2.html