Toward Operationalizing a Psychoeducational Definition of Learning Disabilities

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An operational definition of “learning disabilities” is presented from the standpoint that classificatory psychoeducational definitions must ultimately relate to educational processes. Thus the condition should be described in terms of abilities crucial to educational achievement, and noneducational criteria should not be employed. It is pointed out that the most generally accepted current definition – which identifies children as “learning-disabled” on the basis of behavioral criteria, while excluding others because of etiological and other nonbehavioral factors – overlooks functional similarities among such groups as educable mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed children. These similarities warrant the inclusion under the rubric of “learning-disabled” of some children who may also be grouped within other diagnostic categories. Consequently, the profferred definition is based on a primary concern with day-to-day learning and management issues. Concepts subtended by the definition are operationally defined, and its relationship to programming is discussed.

Congress has defined specific learning disability as follows:

“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, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain disfunction, 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. (Federal Register, 1977, p. 65083)

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This definition, which was originally suggested by the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (1968), is probably the most generally accepted of all those proposed to date. However, it leaves many in the field uncomfortable. It has been referred to as a "definition of consensus" (Bryan & Bryan, 1975, p. 3). It is difficult to apply, primarily because the definitional criteria themselves are ill defined (e.g., what are "the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language"?). Furthermore, although the Federal Register definition would classify children as learning-disabled (LD) on the basis of behavioral criteria, identifying those whose disorders manifest "in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations," it would exclude children on the basis of etiological and other nonbehavioral factors. Thus it would exclude children with learning problems "which are primarily the result of . . . mental retardation and of emotional disturbance," leaving it to the expert to determine when such factors are the "primary causes" of the learning problems. The problem arises from the fact that the behaviors delineated by the definition and the etiologies specified as exclusion factors are so inextricably interwoven as to preclude the designation of a particular etiology as a "primary cause" of behavioral disabilities.

With regard to mental retardation, Neisworth and Greer (1975) argue that there are important functional similarities among educable mentally retarded (EMR) children and those diagnosed as "learning-disabled" such that "real or assumed differences in the underlying conditions . . . [of the two groups] are somewhat irrelevant to the analysis and design of instructional programs" (p. 17). Providing a schema illustrating great overlap of the two diagnostic groups (EMR and LD), those authors argue for descriptions of children in terms of abilities crucial to educational achievement as opposed to noneducational criteria. O'Grady (1974) has demonstrated that, as compared to normal children, "learning-disabled" and "emotionally disturbed" children show functional similarities with regard to deficits in psycholinguistic ability, and Felleman (1974) has described how high anxiety levels in emotionally distressed and disturbed children can create focused effects in learning skills that appear as learning disabilities. Finally, Hallahan and Kauffman (1976) argue that the whole notion of learning disabilities should be viewed as a behavioral concept that does not exclude either educable mentally retarded or emotionally disturbed children:

Of what use, it may be asked, is the term "learning disabilities"? It is, we believe, of the utmost utility if used as a concept rather than a category. Literally, "learning disabilities" is a term indicating learning problems in one or more areas of development or ability, and this definition is common to ED, LD, and EMR alike. Because children placed in each of these categories all have learning problems, "learning disabilities" can provide a much needed unifying theme whose emphasis is upon the specific behavior, abilities, and disabilities of the child. Overworked verbally, though underworked in practice, is the established maxim that it behooves the teacher to be aware of individual differences. Children have dif-