



CASP Position Paper: Specific Learning Disabilities and Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses

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INTRODUCTION

The CASP Board of Directors, as part of its ongoing mission to assist school psychologists, has developed this paper to provide its membership with research-based knowledge regarding the identification of specific learning disabilities for students in California. Specific learning disabilities comprise the largest eligibility category among the 13 areas of eligibility, with 40% of students with special needs identified under the category of SLD in 2012-2013.

A significant change in IDEA 2004 was the guideline directing that states could no longer require local educational agencies to use an ability/achievement discrepancy for the identification of a student with a specific learning disability. While prohibiting states from requiring the use of an ability/achievement discrepancy procedure, IDEA 2004 authorizes alternative approaches to the identification of a student with a specific learning disability. CASP supports the elimination of the ability/achievement discrepancy approach for identifying students with specific learning disabilities and supports a model that includes a comprehensive evaluation that describes a student's pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability.

LEARNING DISABILITIES

In a 2002 Position Paper on Pending Reauthorization of IDEA, CASP listed the following regarding specific learning disabilities:

- Children learn in many different ways
- Some learning styles and aptitudes require modification in typical classroom instructional approaches
- Not all children who learn differently from their peers are learning disabled
- Specific learning disabilities are intrinsic to the individual and persist over time
- Not all children with specific learning disabilities require special education

CASP also endorses these statements from the National Association of School Psychologists that should be considered when evaluating a student for a specific learning disability:

- Specific learning disabilities are endogenous in nature and are characterized by neurologically based deficits in cognitive processes.
- These deficits are specific; that is, they impact particular cognitive processes that interfere with the acquisition of specific skills.

- Specific learning disabilities are heterogeneous – there are various types of learning disabilities, and there is no single defining academic or cognitive deficit or characteristic common to all types of specific learning disabilities.
- Specific learning disabilities may coexist with other disabling conditions (e.g., sensory deficits, language impairment, behavior problems), but are not primarily due to these conditions.
- The manifestation of a specific learning disability is contingent to some extent upon the type of instruction, supports, and accommodations provided, and the demands of the learning situation.
- Multi-tiered systems of student support have been effective as part of comprehensive approach to meet students' academic needs (NASP, 2011).

IDENTIFICATION OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

Any approach to identification of a student with a specific learning disability must consider the nature of specific learning disabilities described above. Therefore, CASP supports the use of a comprehensive approach that incorporates data from response to previous instruction and intervention (e.g. MTSS) occurring prior to referral for special education and assessment identifying a student's strengths and weaknesses across performance in achievement and cognitive processing (PSW). A comprehensive evaluation provides an IEP team with information regarding both environmental (instruction/intervention) and within learner attributes (response and cognitive processing). This approach provides the information essential to (a) make a determination that a student has a specific learning disability, (b) document the need for special education services and (c) provide information important in instruction and intervention design.

An assessment model that includes a comprehensive evaluation of both learner and environment needs to address the following:

- The need for an eligibility model that can be used across grade levels and academic subjects.
- The co-occurrence of disabilities among students with special needs (e.g. ADHD and reading disability). Evaluation within an Integrated Model would provide information required to "... identify all of the child's special education and related service needs, whether commonly linked to the disability category in which the child is classified."
- Recognition that learner attributes affect learning rate.
- The potential presence of SLD in students with very high IQ's who may function academically close to grade level but still display unexpected underachievement, especially among measures of fluency. Without the use of a model recognizing intra-individual differences such a student would not be eligible as a student with a learning disability.
- The need to provide more information about within learner traits. When instructional variables are ruled out through strong pre-referral instruction and intervention, the suggestion is that the student has a specific learning disability (that the reason for underachievement resides in the individual). A comprehensive evaluation provides information about learner traits that are only assumed by a student's lack of response to high quality intervention, and never specified.
- The impact of uneven cognitive profiles on overall ability scores. When using a discrepancy model this may result in a low overall estimate of a student's ability due to the inclusion of scores from a deficit area. Thus a discrepancy would be more difficult to achieve. Conversely, looking at only high splinter scores on any particular cognitive processing area may result in over-identifying students.

- The need for a model that includes both inclusionary and exclusionary criteria. Relying solely on a student's response to instruction and intervention for eligibility decisions relies purely on exclusionary criteria – that the student did not respond as expected. A comprehensive approach includes inclusionary criteria as well – the pattern of strengths and weaknesses seen as characteristic of specific learning disability.

Within a comprehensive approach it is important to first document (a) the provision of high quality instruction and intervention and (b) the student's response to that instruction. This important process has been encouraged in previous SLD eligibility models through the need for pre-referral interventions. Unfortunately, these interventions often lacked key characteristics. Specifically, the need to assure that interventions were research based; the importance of implementing interventions consistently, with fidelity and for an appropriate amount of time and intensity; and the need to monitor a student's progress in response to these interventions. This provides information about the learner's instructional environment and his or her response to that environment.

Evaluation of a student's progress serves to partially rule out instructional factors as a cause of student failure. However, progress monitoring alone will not provide information about whether the intervention was a good instructional match for a given student. Determining whether an intervention was an appropriate instructional match requires further information about the student's specific skills

The information generated in a multi-tiered service delivery model (e.g. RTI) is essential but insufficient for identification of SLD. Using an approach that relies primarily on low achievement is problematic for a variety of reasons. There is a lack of consensus on key components of a multi-tiered model, such as how best to measure responsiveness and identification of high quality instruction/interventions across subjects and grade levels. In addition, multi-tiered service systems are inadequately developed across California. Using low achievement as the defining characteristic for eligibility decisions has the potential to increase over-representation of minority children in special education and lead to de-facto tracking. Students who are gifted yet have a learning disability will not be identified. In summary, the information obtained from a multi-tiered service delivery model (e.g. RTI) is seen as essential but not sufficient for determining the presence of a specific learning disability.

In a comprehensive approach, information about a learner's cognitive processing is seen as essential to SLD eligibility decisions. This information helps teachers, parents and students themselves to better understand why the student has not responded to research based interventions. What has been labeled the pattern of strengths and weaknesses option requires that the team find that the student demonstrates a pattern of strengths and weaknesses relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability. This model for identifying students with specific learning disabilities is based on the following:

- research showing links between various cognitive processes and academic achievement
- recognition that specific learning disabilities are ... "characterized by neurologically based deficits in cognitive processes" (NASP 2007)
- the definition of a specific learning disability as representing unexpected underachievement for a given student, and
- the value of a comprehensive evaluation to the understanding of and educational planning for a student.

An approach that includes assessment of strengths and weaknesses in cognitive processes is based on the assumption that a specific learning disability is exemplified by the presence of a specific area(s) of weakness in a student's achievement and psychological performance along with typical performance in other areas. This model seeks to operationalize the definition of specific learning disability included in IDEA.

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, that may manifest itself in the 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.

Proponents of identifying a pattern of strengths and weaknesses are working to bring the science of learning to the identification of learning disability and the development of interventions. Critical elements seen as indicative of a pattern of strengths and weaknesses include (a) low achievement in at least one academic area, (b) weakness in a cognitive process related to this academic area, (c) evidence of a typical pattern of functioning in other related areas, and (d) elimination of exclusionary factors as the primary cause of the underachievement. The information gleaned from a comprehensive assessment is not only needed for identifying the presence of a specific learning disability but is useful in educational planning for a student whether he or she is determined to be eligible for special education. The Diagnostic Center, Northern California (DCN) has developed a Best Practices model for the Alternative Assessment of African Americans for Special Education that follows a pattern of strengths and weaknesses model in determining SLD without the use of cognitive assessment.

ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

School psychologists are critical to the evaluation process and to the design of educational programs. They have knowledge about learning, mental health, consultation, measurement and the selection of valid assessment tools. In addition, they are uniquely qualified to integrate information from multiple sources in order to understand the "whole" child. CASP continues to support ongoing efforts to assure that school psychologists are equipped to play this critical role in evaluation and provision of supports for students with learning difficulties.

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