SLD Identification: Myths, Misconceptions, and Inconvenient Truths

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Conflict of Interest Disclosure

I am a co-founder of the *Comprehensive Assessment for Intervention* (CAI) website, which operates under Cross-Battery Assessment LLC, a for-profit company.

Outline

- Window Washer
- Quiz
- IDEIA
- Methods of SLD Identification
- Assumptions
- Myths
- Misconceptions
- Inconvenient Truths
- Conclusions
- Count on Me

U.S. (IDEIA) – Federal Definition of SLD

"**A *disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes*** involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which manifests itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such terms include such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia"

There are Three Options for SLD Identification

(34 CFR 300.311(a)(5)), (34 CFR 300.309(a)(2(ii))
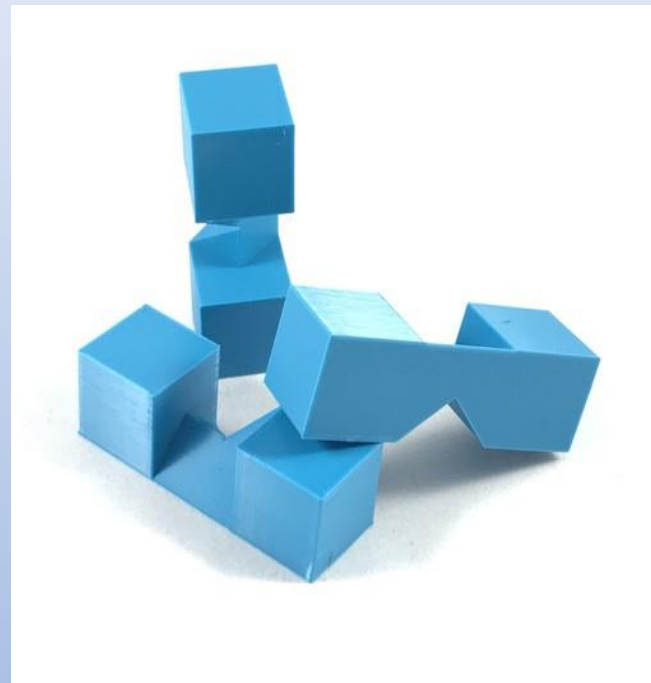
(1) Ability-Achievement Discrepancy (AAD)

- May allow
- Cannot mandate

(2) Response-to-Intervention (RTI)

- Must allow
- "as part of" a comprehensive evaluation

(3) Alternative Research-based Procedures (e.g., PSW)

- May allow

Maki and Adams (2018)

Psychology in the Schools

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A current landscape of specific learning disability identification: Training, practices, and implications

Kathrin E. Maki ✉, Sarah R. Adams

Abstract

Specific learning disability (SLD) identification procedures vary across states (Maki et al., 2015, *School Psychol Quart*, 30, 457–469); however, the extent to which SLD identification methods are implemented at the district level is not well understood. Moreover, the high-stakes nature of SLD identification necessitates extensive training, but research regarding graduate and postgraduate training in SLD is limited. This study examined school psychologists' SLD training and practices through survey methodology. Results showed that a growing number of school psychologists use, prefer, and receive training in response to intervention and pattern of strengths and weaknesses to identify students with SLD while the use of and preference for ability–achievement discrepancy may be decreasing. However, nearly one-third of school psychologists still reported the use of ability–achievement discrepancy. In addition, over half of school psychologists reported using state department of education guidance documents to inform their SLD identification practices. Implications for training and practice are discussed.

A recent survey of 461 school psychologists found that 30.4% reported primarily using AAD whereas 34.5% and 35.1% of school psychologists reported primarily using RtI and a pattern of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) alternative research-based procedure, respectively.

AAD	RtI	PSW
Requires a **discrepancy** between ability and achievement	Requires **discrepancies** in rate and level of learning	Requires **discrepancies** between cognitive strengths and cognitive and academic weaknesses
Does not clarify the reason for academic failure despite a consideration of exclusionary factors	**Does not clarify** the reason for academic failure despite a consideration of exclusionary factors, most notably inadequate instruction and intellectual disability	**Clarifies** the reason for academic failure as part of a comprehensive evaluation that includes evaluation of exclusionary factors
Unexpected underachievement **relative to overall cognitive ability (e.g., FSIQ)**	Unexpected underachievement **relative to evidence-based instruction and intervention (e.g., Tiers 1 and 2)**	Unexpected underachievement **relative to the individual's cognitive capabilities (strengths)**
Weaknesses/deficits **within the individual (primary)**	Weaknesses/deficits **within the environment (primary)**	Weaknesses/deficits **within the individual (primary) and the environment (contributory)**
Link to intervention **not apparent**	Link to intervention **based on academic skill deficits only**; Limited to no new data to inform intervention after failure to respond	Link to intervention **based on academic skill deficits as well as knowledge of how cognitive deficits manifest for the individual in real-world settings** (e.g., classroom)
Insufficient information to individualize instruction and intervention	**Insufficient** information to individualize instruction and intervention beyond Tier 2 and/or Tier 3	**Sufficient** information to individualize instruction and intervention (particularly when combined with RtI/MTSS)
Diagnostic errors (false positives and false negatives) are inevitable	**Diagnostic errors** (false positives and false negatives) are inevitable	**Diagnostic errors** (false positives and false negatives) are inevitable

A Few Assumptions

1) Intelligence is multidimensional

2) Cognitive abilities have distinct and differential predictive relations with a wide range of life outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, occupational choice and achievement, creative accomplishment, daily living skills, long-term health)

3) There is growing evidence that well-tailored interventions can assist individuals to work around specific weaknesses in the context of specific academic tasks

4) RtI/MTSS can be an effective intervention paradigm

5) AAD may be the most reliable index of underachievement

A Few Myths

Myths are traditional stories or beliefs that explain the beliefs or customs of a society. They are often based on ideologies and may not be based on fact.

1) Learning disabilities do not exist

2) There can only be one model for SLD identification (Zero-Sum Game) ①

3) Cognitive batteries/IQ tests are biased and AAD overidentifies minority students

A Few Misconceptions

Beliefs or ideas that are mistaken or incorrect. They are misunderstandings of facts or situations.

1) PSW is the only model that is inaccurate in decision-making

2) Employing PSW is cost-prohibitive

3) Everything that we read about SLD models is true

Inconvenient Truths

1) RtI has a controversial history

2) All SLD identification models are reactive to federal legislation

3) All SLD identification models involve a discrepancy

4) SLD identification is important and SLD identification is complex

Conclusions

1) SLDs are endogenous in nature, characterized by neurologically-based deficits in cognitive processes, and occur in all cultures and nations in the world

2) There is no litmus test for SLD identification

3) Perfect is the enemy of the good

4) School psychologists are key professionals in SLD identification and thus must remain current in their thinking and practice or empirical knowledge about approaches to identification of learning disabilities is continuing to develop and will continue to shape trends in practice

Conclusions (continued)

5) There is much to learn about SLDs, which requires dialogue, debate, and research

6) Ideologies keep us at the extremes and extremes tend to lead to polarization

7) Polarization is not helpful

8) While no model is perfect, there is utility and strengths in each

Thank you!

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