

Identification of Students With Specific Learning Disabilities

School psychologists have long held a prominent role as members of school teams that identify students exhibiting academic difficulties caused by specific learning disabilities (SLDs). SLDs are among the most challenging developmental disorders to identify, as evidenced by the continuing debate in the literature regarding best practices in this area. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is dedicated to promoting policies and practices that are consistent with scholarly research and that yield optimal student outcomes. NASP recognizes the continued debate surrounding the identification of SLDs, the multiple methods of SLD identification, and that local and state regulations dictate the method of identification that practitioners use. Accordingly, this position statement provides guidance for the identification of students with SLDs based on the complexity of human behavior and learning, as well as the limited empirical support in the extant literature for any single method of identification.

WHAT NASP RECOGNIZES ABOUT SLDS

NASP espouses the provision of “effective strategies and skills ... to help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally” (NASP, 2020, p. 2) and recognizes the following as supported by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD; 2016), Cortiella and Horowitz (2014), the United States Department of Education (USDOE; 2017), and the International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities (www.iarld.com):

- SLDs are endogenous in nature and are characterized by neurologically based deficits in cognitive processes, particularly in reading.
- These cognitive processing deficits are specific and interfere with the acquisition of one or more academic skills.
- SLDs 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 SLDs.
- SLDs occur in all cultures and nations in the world.
- SLDs may coexist with other disabling conditions (e.g., speech or language impairment, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other behavior problems), but they are not primarily caused by these conditions.
- SLD remains the largest category of educational disability. Based on 2018–2019 data among students ages 6–21 receiving special education services, 37% had SLDs (USDOE, 2021).
- Of students identified as having an SLD, the majority (about 80%) have a disability in reading.
- Early intervention can significantly reduce the short- and long-term impacts of many SLDs.
- SLDs vary in their degree of severity; moderate to severe learning disabilities can be expected to affect performance throughout the life-span.
- A multitiered system of support is effective as part of a comprehensive approach to meeting students’ academic needs, including those with SLDs.
- Students identified as gifted and talented may also have SLDs.

WHAT NASP RECOGNIZES ABOUT IDENTIFICATION OF SLDS

First and foremost, NASP supports school psychologists as data-based decision makers who have the training and expertise to utilize a problem-solving framework as they strive to identify student-specific learning challenges. To accomplish this goal, school psychologists work collaboratively within a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) to ensure that *all* students have access to high-quality instruction and interventions delivered with fidelity. The need for systems-level procedures to ensure access to high-quality instructions and interventions, delivered with fidelity *prior to* a referral for SLD, is essential. Given this foundation, NASP recognizes the following:

- Identification needs to be based on multiple reliable and valid sources of data, including information related to the learner and the learning environment.
- The primary value of a psychoeducational evaluation is to identify the specific needs of the student and to inform appropriate instruction and intervention.
- SLDs reflect an individual’s challenge to read, write, do math, listen, or speak at levels of expected proficiency and are not caused by inadequate or poor instruction.
- Empirical knowledge about approaches to identification of learning disabilities is continuing to develop and will continue to shape trends in practice.
- Identification methods should inform intervention (i.e., treatment utility) including consideration for accommodations.
- Identification methods should reduce, with the goal of eliminating, disproportional identification of students of color, English learners, and economically disadvantaged students as having SLD.
- A multidisciplinary team of knowledgeable individuals should work to make the identification of SLD for a student.
- School psychologists have unique training and expertise related to SLD identification and play a critical role in multidisciplinary evaluation of SLD.
- Establishing reliable, valid methodologies for identifying SLD is necessary to ensure equitable access to services, minimize disproportionality in identification, and to improve outcomes for students.

CONTEXT OF CURRENT PRACTICES: FEDERAL DEFINITION AND REGULATIONS

In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) or Public Law (PL) 108-456 was reauthorized. The IDEIA defines a SLD as:

... 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. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (34 CFR 300.8(c)(10))

A critical change in the IDEIA 2004 was the option to use “a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, evidence-based intervention.” Response to intervention (RTI) was thus introduced as a method to support the identification of students with learning disabilities. This was in response to research demonstrating overidentification of students with SLD secondary to a lack of effective instruction, particularly in the area of reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). The most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act of 1965, renamed the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), is a driving force in recent education practices. For example, there are more than 50 references to the use of “evidence-based” interventions and strategies in ESSA. In Section 8101(21)(B) of the ESSA, *evidence-based interventions* are defined as: “practices or programs that have evidence to show that they are effective at producing results and improving outcomes when implemented.” Taken together, the ESSA and IDEIA require the provision of effective, evidence-based instruction in order to prevent students from being identified as having an SLD because of ineffective or inconsistent instruction.

The IDEIA regulations for SLD identification state the following:

- (a) General. A State must adopt, consistent with §300.309, criteria for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability as defined in §300.8(c)(10). In addition, the criteria adopted by the State—
 - (1) Must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in §300.8(c)(10);
 - (2) Must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research- based intervention; and

(3) May permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in §300.8(c)(10).

(b) Consistency with State criteria. A public agency must use the State criteria adopted pursuant to paragraph (a) of this section in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF STUDENTS WITH SUSPECTED SLD

When high-quality instruction and implementation of evidence-based interventions within general education do not meet a student’s educational needs and, therefore, an SLD is suspected, a comprehensive assessment and evaluation by qualified professionals is an essential step in determining SLD eligibility and individualized educational needs. “The NJCLD strongly supports comprehensive assessment and evaluation of students with learning disabilities by a multidisciplinary team for the identification and diagnosis of students with learning disabilities” (NJCLD, 2010, p. 1).

The twofold purpose of a comprehensive assessment and evaluation is (a) to investigate why a student has difficulty achieving in the classroom despite high-quality core instruction and (b) to make recommendations for effective, evidence-based intervention. In accordance with federal law, the multidisciplinary team and other qualified professionals must review existing data during an initial evaluation and during any reevaluations. Existing data might include prior evaluations, current classroom-based assessments, local or state assessments, classroom observations, and input from caregivers and teachers. The comprehensive assessment and evaluation includes a variety of assessments and evaluation methods that must not be discriminatory on a racial or cultural basis, must be administered in the language and form most likely to yield accurate information, are used for purposes for which the measures are reliable and valid, are administered by trained and knowledgeable personnel and in accordance with instructions provided by the producer, and include all areas of suspected disability (NJCLD, 2010; Ortiz, 2014). Essentially, the goal of a comprehensive assessment and evaluation is to gather relevant cognitive, behavioral, developmental, and academic information, including existing data and information provided by the caregiver, to determine whether the student has an SLD and to ascertain the educational needs of the student.

Each student presents with their own set of personal experiences that may affect their learning. As such, the multidisciplinary team should consider the extent to which factors related to the student’s background and experience might influence the student’s academic performance. When deciding on eligibility, the multidisciplinary team also considers whether the determining factor is the lack of high-quality core instruction in the academic domains, limited English proficiency, or cultural and linguistic differences, as well as other factors (e.g., emotional, socioeconomic, sensory impairment). Multidisciplinary teams should consider whether multitiered interventions and assessment techniques are utilized for all students and whether they are culturally sensitive and adequately address the needs of English learners. To guide this process, multidisciplinary teams may wish to develop checklists or worksheets that include questions to consider (e.g., Have there been any significant or traumatic events in the student’s life that contribute to the learning problem? Are there any variables related to family history that may have affected school performance?) and information sources that should be reviewed (e.g., medical records, absentee/truancy records, level of performance and rate of progress to peers with similar backgrounds) as part of the prereferral process (Whittaker & Ortiz, 2019). Additionally, the multidisciplinary team should consider what additional assessment information, if any, is needed to rule out these exclusionary factors.

Students from racially and ethnically minoritized backgrounds, students who experience low-income and economic marginalization, and students who are English language learners are more likely to be inappropriately identified as having a disability (Sullivan, 2011; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). Therefore, fair and equitable assessment of students from these backgrounds requires special expertise. Professionals involved in eligibility determination must understand the implications of culture and language, demonstrate awareness of their own biases and expertise, and seek consultation with more experienced colleagues when necessary. Use of multiple data points, including a comprehensive psychosocial history and data from problem-solving frameworks, is of particular importance when assessing minoritized populations. Culturally appropriate tools and norms should be used, including local norms when appropriate. Meaningful opportunities should be provided for engagement and participation of culturally and linguistically diverse families in the evaluation process.

NASP recommends the initial assessment and evaluation of a student with a suspected SLD include individual comprehensive assessment and evaluation as determined by the multidisciplinary team. A comprehensive assessment and evaluation may include historical trends of performance and current measures of academic skills (norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, and curriculum-based), cognitive abilities and processes, social–emotional competencies, and oral language proficiency, as appropriate; classroom observations; and indirect sources of data (e.g., teacher and caregiver reports). Identification and eligibility determinations should not be based on any single method or measure. Existing data from a problem-solving process that determines if the student responds to scientific, evidence-based intervention should be considered at the time of referral; however, new data of this type may be collected as part of the comprehensive assessment and evaluation. Assessment of cognitive ability may be considered to identify processing deficits that may adversely affect a student’s academic performance and, along with other data, to rule out other disabilities such as intellectual disabilities. When selecting assessment tools (standardized or others), school psychologists should consider the potential for bias against certain populations that may lead to disproportionate (over or under) identification of disabilities and ensure that the tools and methods used are appropriate for the population (i.e., culture, language). Data should be collected and interpreted with consideration of the whole child, including individual student strengths. When making decisions about the methods and data to be collected, the relevance of the data to subsequent intervention is of paramount importance.

COMMON SLD IDENTIFICATION METHODS

Provision of special education services under SLD must consider: (a) evidence of a learning disability; (b) underachievement; and (c) an exclusion of other factors or learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of intellectual disability; of emotional disturbance; of lack of educational opportunity; or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (Lichtenstein, 2014).

When considering the evidence of a learning disability (in addition to the consideration of exclusionary factors) one of three methods is typically implemented, and each is used in conjunction with professional judgment. Each method has strengths and limitations, can be used individually or concurrently, and requires that school psychologists use best practices in decision making to ensure accurate classification. Methodology aside, if a student has not had the opportunity to receive high-quality core instruction and evidence-based interventions, teams should exercise prudence in qualifying the student as having an SLD under any method.

Three commonly used methods for SLD identification are described below. Within each method there are several possible variations. It is the position of NASP that two of these three broad methods are viable and supportable options. Use of the traditional aptitude–achievement discrepancy approach is not recommended and is best discontinued, because of persistent overreliance on cut scores with this method. The rationale for this position is outlined below.

Aptitude–Achievement Discrepancy

The aptitude-achievement discrepancy methods for the identification of SLD have a long history in the field (e.g., Hallahan & Mercer, 2002) and in some cases may have correctly identified a student as having an SLD as opposed to another disability (e.g., intellectual disability). However, these approaches vary in scope, and some provide limited information regarding the specific area of psychological processing adversely affecting academic performance. Many conceptual, technical, and psychometric limitations with aptitude–achievement discrepancy as a paradigm to identify learning disabilities are well noted in the literature (e.g., Cahan et al., 2012; Hale et al., 2011; Maehler & Schuchardt, 2011). Furthermore, these methods have been shown to overidentify African American students as having SLD (Izumi et al., 2019) and do not differentiate well students with and without SLD (Busch et al., 2015).

In view of the knowledge in the field of learning disabilities, consideration of the federal definition and regulations of SLD, and the many documented psychometric limitations of these methods, their continued use with an overreliance on cut off scores (whether obtained or estimated true scores) should be strongly reconsidered as best practice for the identification of a learning disability, and when possible discontinued. To this end, NASP does not support aptitude–achievement discrepancy methods in and of themselves, especially those that require strict cut scores or arbitrary

formulas for identifying SLD. Instead, NASP recommends that identification of learning disabilities and eligibility decisions are made in the context of a multidisciplinary team and through use of data from multiple sources and contexts. The methods described next offer alternative practices to be considered.

Response to Intervention as Part of a Comprehensive MTSS System

An RTI method for identifying the determination of a SLD is grounded in a comprehensive MTSS that is intended to provide quality instruction and timely interventions in the general education setting, delivered on a continuum of individualization and intensity, based on the student's learning needs. An RTI method is based on the principles of early intervention and prevention, and it considers a dual discrepancy—underachievement when compared to peers and an insufficient response to a targeted, evidence-based intervention, again compared to peers. When using an RTI method, ongoing progress monitoring using targeted and sensitive measures is an important data source to document the response to evidence-based instruction. These data may then be used to inform subsequent eligibility and intervention decisions.

The IDEA recognizes RTI as an allowable method for SLD identification. Specifically, state education agencies “must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention” (IDEIA 300.307 a(2)). Numerous studies (e.g., Coyne et al., 2018; Fan & Hansmann, 2015) have demonstrated that RTI/MTSS methods provide a useful framework for effective intervention delivery and yield important data for progress monitoring of student achievement. Yet, its effectiveness as a service delivery model can vary among schools, districts, and populations of students (Barrett & Newman, 2018). Furthermore, its effectiveness as a reliable and valid method of SLD identification has not yet been fully researched (e.g., Balu et al., 2015; Hendricks & Fuchs, 2020). While early screening of students within an RTI framework adds to the prediction of reading outcomes for students (e.g., Bose et al., 2019; Catts et al., 2015), RTI methods may show limited to moderate agreement among themselves in terms of identifying which students have SLD (e.g., Barth et al., 2008; Brown Waesche et al., 2011).

Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses

Although the patterns of strengths and weaknesses (PSW) method is not explicitly referenced in the federal regulations, it is a practice used in many states for determining whether a student has an SLD (see Maki & Adams, 2019). PSW methods are referred to as a third method in the literature, incorporating elements of the aptitude–achievement discrepancy and RTI methods (e.g., Hale et al., 2006; Hale et al., 2011). Users of one or more PSW methods typically support the use of universal screening and effective Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions for students experiencing learning difficulties. In the absence of a positive response to an intervention, students receive a comprehensive assessment and evaluation to determine the existence of patterns of cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses which may suggest an SLD.

Regarding a comprehensive assessment and evaluation, several PSW methods for SLD identification have been posited in the literature, each having its own strengths and limitations. All of them have several characteristics in common, including the following: (a) collection of data from multiple sources over time, (b) identification of a student’s cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses, (c) evaluation of intra- and interindividual differences among a student’s own cognitive abilities, (d) determination of parallels between a student’s cognitive functioning and demonstrated academic weaknesses, (e) assessment and evaluation of exclusionary factors, (f) evaluation of ecological validity of findings, and (g) determination of negative impact on associated life functions (e.g., academic; see Alfonso & Flanagan, 2018).

Like research examining RTI methods for identifying SLD, research supporting the use of various PSW methods is limited. Studies have found mixed evidence for PSW’s reliability and validity as an identification method. The various PSW methods tend to have low agreement with each other (e.g., Miciak et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2016; Schroeder et al., 2017). Even within a single PSW method, there can be low agreement about the existence of a learning disability (e.g., Miciak et al., 2015; Miciak et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017). However, PSW methods may correctly identify more students with SLD than the traditional aptitude–achievement discrepancy method (Janzen et al., 2013). Research is mixed on the efficacy of various methods to correctly identify true positive and true negative cases of SLD (e.g., Kranzler et al., 2019; Maki et al., 2021; McGill et al., 2018). It should be noted, however, that the methodological rigor

of the aforementioned studies varies, suggesting the need for ongoing research of PSW approaches (e.g., Schneider et al., 2022).

ONGOING NEEDS OF THE FIELD

NASP appreciates that there are multiple perspectives on the identification of learning disabilities. While a desired goal would be to endorse a single framework for the assessment and identification of learning disabilities, there currently exists support for multiple perspectives. Furthermore, the lack of consensus on an operational definition of SLD also makes the endorsement of a single framework challenging. While the extant research has generally highlighted that the aptitude–achievement discrepancy method for identification of specific learning disabilities is problematic, the research is otherwise varied with regard to the RTI and PSW frameworks. Therefore, NASP maintains that it is important to highlight the ongoing needs of the field to continue advancing knowledge on the identification of, and intervention for, specific learning disabilities:

- School psychologists need to advocate for systems that promote equitable access to high-quality instruction and intervention for all students regardless of label or disability classification.
- The field needs to focus on using evidence-based practices. Ineffective policies or practices that lead to disproportionate or inappropriate identification should be explicitly discouraged and removed from use.
- The field needs to establish valid and reliable methods that can be consistently applied across states and school districts to identify SLD.
- The field needs to conduct and disseminate a robust body of practical, high-quality, rigorous, objective research examining the reliability and viability of the methods of identifying specific learning disabilities. This research should also inform the decisions of practitioners, policy makers, and other stakeholders. Examples of specific research questions include:
 - What are the best ways to quantify and identify a failure to respond to intervention for more qualitative aspects of academic achievement in areas that are difficult to quantify, such as reading comprehension or written expression?
 - Are there times when failure to respond to intervention is *not* indicative of an SLD (above and beyond the exclusionary criteria)?
 - How can the presentation of a pattern of strengths and weaknesses inform evidence-based interventions and accommodations needed?
 - Can a student still have an SLD if there is not a pattern of strengths and weaknesses?
 - How do various cognitive and neuropsychological deficits (e.g., memory, reasoning, attention, processing speed) adversely affect reading, writing, math, and oral language in a way that would suggest the presence of an SLD?
- The field needs a systematic approach for considering, assessing, and addressing the impact of exclusionary factors (e.g., lack of exposure to instruction, vision and hearing deficits, English language learning) on decisions about SLD eligibility determination.
- The field needs to identify and advocate for clear direction when there are conflicts between research, policy, and practice in the identification and treatment of learning disabilities.

SUMMARY

Expertise in the procedures necessary to identify an SLD is an essential area of specialization for all school psychologists. Training programs teach school psychologists the fundamental skills for consultation and knowledge requisite for valid and reliable SLD identification. Regardless of the method used, school psychologists have ethical obligations to ensure fair and equitable evaluations for all students. Additionally, an MTSS model that promotes high-quality instruction and intervention prior to formal evaluation should be present regardless of the identification method. Multidisciplinary teams that consider ecological and trauma-informed frameworks should be used to make well-informed, data-based decisions about the presence or absence of SLD based on all evidence provided through any method of SLD identification.

To reiterate, it is the position of NASP that all assessments and evaluations of SLD incorporate information relative to students' educational context, including the presence or absence of MTSS. It is the role of the multidisciplinary team to determine the relevance of RTI and PSW data in determining eligibility for special education services for any given student.

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