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Looking Backward to Look Forward: Reflections of Past Presidents of the Council for Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Anniversaries offer a time for reflection, celebration, validation, and sometimes, simply a candid conversation on the current state of a field. In the field of learning disabilities, anniversaries offer a time to consider how far the field has come and just how far is left to go to understand what a learning disability is. Definitional understanding is foundational for moving forward. This column presents findings from a series of short conversations with past presidents of the Council for Learning Disabilities, individuals who are also leading experts in the field of learning disabilities. Results suggest four different thoughts about the definition of learning disabilities, two main themes regarding areas in which the field needs to focus, and two themes specific to where the field may be headed in the next 20 to 25 years. The column concludes with a discussion of implications for the future.

Keywords

CLD, definition, future directions, learning disability

Many recent anniversaries of sorts have been celebrated, anticipated, and passed in the field of special education. The year 2015 marked great change and potential progress, for it included the 25th anniversary of Dr. Donald D. Hammill's (1990) article recognizing emerging consensus on the definitional debate surrounding the field of learning disabilities (LD), the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act of 1965 as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), the 40th anniversary of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (otherwise known as Public Law 94-142, the precursor to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] of 1990), and the 25th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990). Indeed, in their seminal article, Semmel, Gerber, and MacMillan (1994) identified 25 years as a time of celebration, a validation of sorts, “of our relative maturity as a field of scholarship and educational practice” (p. 481). Even a 40th anniversary speaks to the maturity of the field while concurrently highlighting its relative youth. Anniversaries, though, regardless of the number, equally represent a time of reflection.

In 1990, Hammill published an article entitled “On Defining Learning Disabilities: An Emerging Consensus” in the *Journal of Learning Disabilities*. In this article, Hammill suggested that consensus, as it relates to the definition of LD, is near, conveying that there is much overlap in the definition of LD that has emerged since the early 1960s. Later, though, he stated that “none of the NJCLD [National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities] members believe that their definition has settled the issue for all time” (p. 83). And, indeed, the challenges of definitional understanding are part of the field’s past, present, and (most likely) future, as the question, What is a learning disability? continues to be debated today.

During the field’s infancy, Wiederholt (1974) recognized that the field of LD was characterized by debate and discussion surrounding definition as captured in his early, influential chapter entitled “Historical Perspectives on the Education of the Learning Disabled.” In this chapter, Wiederholt, a preeminent scholar in the field of LD, presented a two-dimensional framework that outlined the contributions of professionals to the field of LD. Despite the arrival and expansion of LD on the special education stage throughout the 1960s, thanks in part to the influence of parent and professional organizations, it would not be without controversy. According to Wiederholt, the field of LD had yet to reveal its value but nonetheless needed careful cultivating as it exhibited promise for helping a large number of students in public schools nationwide.

The NJCLD was formed in 1975 as a national committee that represented numerous organizations (including the Council for Learning Disabilities [CLD]). The organization was and still is dedicated to the education and advancement of individuals

with LD (for more information on the NJCLD, see <http://www.ldonline.org/about/partners/njclld>). However, the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), which defined LD, raised many questions about what the definition meant and how such interpretation would affect service delivery. According to the IDEA [Title I, Part A, Sec. 602(30)],

The term “specific learning disability” means a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

In following years, the NJCLD issued its own definition of LD, which was slightly revised between the 1980s and 1990s and later adopted by the CLD. According to the NJCLD (LD Online, 2015),

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences,

insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences.

Differences between these definitions predominately reflected the effect of LD across the lifespan rather than just in children, focused the etiology of LD on central nervous system dysfunction, and sought to address issues of misinterpretation, including in relation to the exclusion clause (NJCLD, 1991).

But the issue of definition would not be settled. Late in the 1990s (and following the 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA), the NJCLD commissioned the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education to revisit and re-examine the federal regulations for identifying LD in the school-age population. Beginning in spring 2000, OSEP began this initiative by identifying 21 individuals to review the extant literature in the field by crafting nine white papers and more than 30 responses to be presented at an LD summit the following summer. Members and leadership of the CLD attended the LD summit held in August 2001. Elksnin and colleagues (2001) summarized the white papers, which identified key issues facing the field of LD. Key themes included (a) an emphasis on providing effective early intervention supports to struggling learners, (b) better discriminating of students who are low achieving from students with LD, (c) the validity of discrepancy as a construct for identifying LD, (d) the possibility of conceptualizing LD as nonresponsiveness to intervention, and (e) the incongruence among research, policy, and practice for identifying students with LD.

Moreover, legislation related to the education of students with disabilities and students with LD altered and offered alternate views of LD. The 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) permitted school districts to use student response or lack thereof to evidence-based practices as part of the referral process to special education for a student with LD—what is currently referred to as *response to intervention*. This was a marked paradigmatic shift, as until this time (pre-2004), school districts exclusively relied on discrepancy between academic achievement and expected potential as measured by intelligence quotient (IQ) testing. Consequently, since the 2004 IDEA reauthorization, the questions of what is a learning disability and who has a learning disability have been brought up

again, even though use of the response to intervention framework was and still is intended to earlier identify students who are struggling and to prevent the later academic struggle of students with the most intensive needs. The fact that understanding how to define, identify, and support students with LD would continue to spark discussion reflects the history of the field and the myriad individuals who have entered the national conversation. These voices have been strengthened over the years by changes in legislation that have (a) opened the general education classroom to students with LD, (b) emphasized the importance of all students making progress in academics, and (c) held students to high standards of academic excellence as highlighted in the ESSA.

Today (i.e., as of this writing – 2016), in light of legislative actions, many question what education will look like for supporting students with disabilities broadly, but specifically for students with LD. Given the delay (i.e., 12 years) since the last reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004, implications of reauthorization have the potential to significantly affect the future of the field of LD and how to assess and identify a student with a learning disability. Moreover, recent initiatives like the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (National Governor's Association & State Education Chiefs, 2010) across multiple states and the removal of the highly qualified statute from ESSA challenge the field to consider how to best serve students with disabilities, specifically students with LD, as well as determine who is qualified to provide these services. Therefore, special educators must remain attentive to the federal language and intent of the law and any of its reauthorizations.

However, movement and change are not always transparent. What progress has the field made over the past 25 to 40 years? And, where is it going now? It seems that the answer might not be so simple, even among those with well-established roles in the field and in national organizations that are aimed at addressing, meeting, and improving the needs of individuals with LD.

Call to Action

This article examines the voices of leading scholars in the field of LD (i.e., past presidents of the CLD), exploring the overarching themes from their definitions of LD,

what the field currently needs to focus on, and the recommended directions in which the field should or could move in the next 20 to 25 years. The objective of this column is to heighten awareness of the need for considerations of how best to support students with LD and the implications of past practice on future practice.

The Interviews

At the 2013 CLD conference held in Austin, Texas, the author had an opportunity to speak briefly with seven past presidents of the CLD, six of whom granted permission to use their words as part of this article. In these brief conversations (approximately 5–20 minutes), three questions were explored with the past presidents: (a) What is your definition of LD? (b) What does the field of LD need to focus on immediately? and (c) Where will our field be in 20 to 25 years? All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and past presidents had an opportunity to review the audio-recordings and transcripts for accuracy and offer feedback.

The CLD is an international organization “committed to enhancing the education and quality of life for individuals with learning disabilities across the life span” (<http://www.cldinternational.org>). The six past presidents included Dr. Donald Hammill, president of PRO-ED; Dr. Gerald Wallace, professor emeritus at George Mason University; Dr. Joseph Boyle, associate professor of special education at Temple University; Dr. Edwin Ellis, professor emeritus at the University of Alabama; Dr. Diane Bryant, Mollie Villeret Davis Professorship in LD at the University of Texas at Austin; and Dr. Brian Bryant, research professor and fellow in the Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk at the University of Texas at Austin.

Defining Learning Disabilities

When asked to reflect on the definition of LD, past presidents offered four different perspectives on definition. The first two perspectives encompassed the NJCLD definition discussed earlier, as three of the six participants discussed the academic areas and life functions affected by the disorder. Dr. Hammill accepted the NJCLD’s definition of LD, calling it “the most defensible and professionally sound definition of learning disabilities.”

Dr. Brian Bryant also referenced the NJCLD definition, although he and Dr. Diane Bryant both focused on certain aspects of the conceptualization of the construct of LD. These aspects included that the disorder is related to the central nervous system and involves the notion of executive functioning (Dr. Diane Bryant). Dr. Brian Bryant suggested an emphasis on the lifespan nature of the disorder and the idea that a LD could be acquired or be developmental. Moreover, Dr. Diane Bryant indicated that a LD “is a basic psychological processing disorder” and Dr. Brian Bryant explained that, according to early accounts of LD, “it started out as an acquired condition.” Both Drs. Bryant also indicated that LD are related to various academic areas, using language synonymous with that outlined in the NJCLD definition.

Two participants identified traditional definitions of LD that rely on discrepancy between academic achievement and IQ. According to Dr. Boyle, this discrepancy is characterized by “average to above average IQ, and then sub- average achievement in some areas.” Dr. Wallace captured this discrepancy by explaining that “basically we’re still talking about a kid who has the intellectual ability, but for some reason is not working up to that intellectual ability as assessed by . . . some content area . . . [and that is] demonstrated in a . . . very consistent . . . deep-thread within a regular classroom instruction.”

The fourth perspective on definition was provided by Dr. Ellis, who indicated, “I don’t have a definition of LD,” later calling it (the definition) a “moving target,” before explaining, “My personal understanding of LD has changed so much and so dramatically in so many ways and . . . I think that . . . the idea of defining LD, in terms of the distinct definition, is kind of a lost cause.” As Dr. Ellis stated, the ambiguity or tension exists as a moral conflict between students with LD being “a protected class of people with disabilities” and other students who “just have learning issues across the board.” The “ethical issues” inherent in this decision, Dr. Ellis continued, are “that so many of these interventions that were originally designed and validated with kids that were identified as LD, proved to be equally effective with any other kid that was struggling. And, and, I’ve yet to see an intervention that worked with a kid with LD that didn’t work with other kids not classified as LD, but had similar struggles.”

Needed Focus

When asked about what the field of LD currently needs to focus on, two main themes were identified. First was the need for “defining its borders” (Dr. Hammill) and “maintaining its identity” (Dr. Diane Bryant). This was specifically explained as the ability to clearly delineate the difference(s) between students with LD and students who are low achieving (Dr. Hammill, Drs. Diane and Brian Bryant). According to Dr. Diane Bryant, “Maintaining the fact that there is indeed such a thing as a learning disability, and . . . providing appropriate services to students with learning disabilities. I think that’s critical.” “Unless they [the field] can do that [define its borders],” Dr. Hammill stated, “learning disabilities has no future.” Dr. Brian Bryant concurred, stating, “There is a real need to continue to look at that [identifying students who are low-achieving versus students with LD] and try to differentiate who those students are, . . . [be]cause if you don’t, it’s going to be a disintegration of the field.”

A second focus of those interviewed was pedagogy, including instructional and assessment practices (Drs. Ellis, Wallace, Diane Bryant, and Brian Bryant). This emphasis was viewed differently across the past presidents. For Dr. Ellis, the focus of pedagogy must be on the ways to improve it and to get teachers to use validated practices (e.g., practices with social and content validity), but he also acknowledged that pedagogy must also focus on teacher preparation. According to Dr. Wallace, pedagogy must focus on what to do for the student with LD, including intensifying interventions for these students. However, Dr. Boyle reiterated that particular attention is needed in providing content area instruction to secondary students.

The Next 20 to 25 Years

Two themes also emerged when researchers reflected on where the field is going in the next 20 to 25 years. First, the past presidents focused on the idea of a *pendulum shift* that has a tendency to occur every few years. Although all researchers did not specifically reference a pendulum, their responses overlapped with those who did. Dr. Ellis, for example, referenced the pendulum, stating, “There may be enough kickback from parents of kids with disabilities . . . to really force the policies to change so there’s more opportunity to provide the level of intensive instruction . . . that a lot of these kids

need.” Dr. Hammill acknowledged that the needs of students with LD “can’t be managed by just tweaking the general ed[ucation] curriculum,” emphasizing the need for more clinical supports.

Drs. Diane and Brian Bryant similarly spoke of a pendulum shift, but the shift that they noted is one in which the field will see the resurgence of resource room programs. However, Dr. Diane Bryant also believes that work in the area of neuro-imaging will help to better understand LD. On the other hand, Dr. Brian Bryant spoke of the pendulum shifts that are likely to occur as being cyclical. He said, “I’d suspect 25 years from now, we might be right where we are. I think in the intervening period, we’re at a crossroads; . . . we go down one road and it’d be the end of learning disabilities as we know it.” Unfortunately, Dr. Brian Bryant said, “We don’t go where the data lead us as a field . . . for very long.”

Second, two interviewees reflected more on where they hope the field will be within this time (e.g., personal hopes). Dr. Wallace was the only one to provide a slightly different approach to the question, acknowledging that in 20 to 25 years, students will still have disabilities and that he hopes the field will be “beyond the point of trying to figure out... where we do it and how we do it.” Dr. Boyle explained that he hopes the field is at a point where elementary and middle school teachers “learn strategies and they learn research-based techniques, interventions, so then they [students] don’t necessarily have the same issues when they’re in high school.” Furthermore, Dr. Boyle indicated that perhaps researchers must also consider early childhood skills that may be highly correlated with reading outcomes, such as language and communication skills.

Conclusion

Results of these brief interviews suggest the need for change and action on a variety of fronts, from defining the borders of LD and distinguishing the difference between struggling or low-achieving students and students with LD, to refining pedagogical practices for working with students and training preservice teachers, to returning to the roots of special education (e.g., becoming more clinical in practice) to support the needs of students with LD. These actions were comparatively reflected during the LD summit sponsored by OSEP, which was appropriately subtitled “Building

a Foundation for the Future” (Elksnin et al., 2001). However, these past presidents’ voices also echo the tenuous nature of any foundation, especially one that has not always followed the data, according to Dr. Brian Bryant. Such uncertainty can either further exacerbate the definitional debate or center the rough tides and focus the field back on its early foundations. Indeed, such a sentiment was earlier suggested by Wiederholt (1974) when he warned that researchers in the field of LD “use the past as points of reference and guides” or risk the possibility that they “may either recommit past follies or ‘rediscover’ the contributions of their professional progenitors when they should instead extend and correct the works of those who pioneered before them” (p. 103).

Perhaps what unifies the voices of these past presidents is the recognition that much work remains, work that they are clearly invested in and continue to work to improve. Indeed, this is a time of reflection, renewal, and revitalization, and special educators must remain vigilant in their efforts for not only supporting the needs of all students with LD but also remaining abreast of changing trends in the field. Looking backward to look forward may be just what the field needs.

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