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School Psychologists' Perspectives on LD Determination Practices and Student Characteristics Kim Phillips-Grant, Scott Showalter, Daryl Mellard, Sonja deBoer and Barbara Starrett National Research Center on Learning Disabilities The University of Kansas

ABSTRACT

Qualitative analysis of focus groups conducted with school psychologists in Louisiana (LA), Minnesota (MN), and Missouri (MO) informs professionals about views on LD determination models and practices, and the characteristics that uniquely distinguish students with specific learning disabilities (SLD). School psychologists were asked: (a) What contributes to variations in practices across schools and within districts? (b) What are the strengths/weaknesses of the aptitude-achievement discrepancy model? (c) How do LD students differ from students needing help? and (d) Which is more important: students who display evidence of learning disabilities or students in need of services? The analysis found (a) diversity in practices between states, and (b) both similarity and variability in school psychologists' conceptualization of students.

INTRODUCTION

Characteristics that typify most students with SLD are rarely in dispute (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004); however, varied opinions exist about the ways these students differ from other students who experience low achievement. School districts throughout the nation use many different SLD eligibility models (e.g., aptitude-achievement discrepancy, response to intervention [RTI]) to allocate limited resources and services to students—resulting in different SLD prevalence rates and service inequities from one community to the next. In order to improve decision making process in existing and future identification technologies (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004), an understanding of the strengths and limitations of such models is needed. Further, insights into how beliefs and biases of important stakeholders, such as school psychologists, influence special education eligibility decisions will to improve existing and future LD determination models.

PRESENT STUDY

Our purpose was to gain insight into the underlying reasons for difference in SLD determination models and practices, and the resulting variation in SLD prevalence rates from state-to-state, within a state, and even at the local level. Because stakeholders, such as parents, administrators, educators, and school psychologists, each make a contribution to the SLD determination process, focus groups were conducted with individuals from each group. In this presentation, we present the findings from the school psychologist focus groups.

METHOD

Participants

School psychologists were invited to participate in the study because their "role provides a broader normative interpretation of student behavior based on standardized, normative assessment and informal measures. They are considered important to providing a framework for describing and interpreting student behavior (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004, p. 233).

Researchers selected LA, MN, and MO for the focus group locales because these states use different SLD determination and service eligibility models (e.g., district level evaluation teams, curriculum based measurement, and aptitude-achievement discrepancy model). A liaison from each state department of education invited 6 to 8 practicing school psychologists to participate in focus groups based on researcher identified criteria: (a) high familiarity with the state's LD identification and determination practices; (b) availability to meet with the focus group at least three times; (c) at least two years experience as a school psychologist or psychometrician; and (d) a mix of representation from districts with large, medium and small student enrollments.

Participating school psychologists received a draft agenda and an abridged version of "Maintaining Rights – Achieving Better Outcomes: Identifying and Serving Students with Learning Disabilities (National Center on Learning Disabilities, 2002). The purpose of the article was to inform participants on national issues surrounding LD identification practices and to help them review their local practices within the broader context of the national debate relative to LD determination issues.

Focus Group Methods

NRCLD researchers conducted three 90-minute sessions with each focus group. The sessions followed a "set agenda with questions addressing topics that focused on current issues and local practices of LD determination (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004, p. 235)." Specific questions posed to school psychologists that are of interest to this presentation include: (a) What contributes to variations in practices across schools and within districts? (b) What are the strengths/weaknesses of the aptitude-achievement discrepancy model? (c) How do LD students differ from students needing help? and (d) Which is more important: students who display evidence of learning disabilities or students in need of services?

Focus Group Analysis

At least two NRCLD project staff members independently reviewed transcripts of each focus group session. Each looked for similarities, contrasts, and themes within and between the discussions. After independent reviews, the staff members presented, discussed, and clarified findings. The percentage of agreement for each question by state ranged from 78% to 100% with one exception (see Table 1).

RESULTS

Table 2 presents participants' views on factors contributing to variations in SLD practices across states and districts. Little commonality between states existed with regard to these factors. Moreover, school psychologists identified only one factor in all three states: different criteria are used by different schools, districts and states to identify students with LD.

Table 3 delineates school psychologists' responses to the question of "what are the strengths and weaknesses of the aptitude-achievement discrepancy model?" Psychologists in MO and MN focused on more of the weaknesses of the aptitude-achievement discrepancy model than its strengths, with considerable variability between the states. The one weakness that both states identified was that students have to "wait to fail" before they can be identified with a learning disability. Psychologists in MN did not identify any strengths of the model.

In Table 4, participants' responses to each question were grouped into categories based on their similarity. LA was not asked how LD students differ from students needing help and so their responses are not included in the results. According to school psychologists in MO and MN, the defining characteristics of students with SLD are that they are discrepant learners who learn differently and require a specific type of instruction. A student's disability is viewed as chronic and can have a severe impact on his or her ability to learn. In contrast, the defining characteristics of a student in need of help are that he or she is always struggling, experiences learning deficits in most subject areas, and that with the right kind of instruction the difficulties could be ameliorated. In Table 5, participants indicated which factor held more weight—identification, need, or services. Although identification was cited and discussed heavily by school psychologists in both states, need of services was also strongly emphasized. In sum, no strong consensus emerged.

DISCUSSION

School psychologists from LA, MN, and MO engaged in extended discussions on questions related to LD identification practices and student characteristics. We sought their views to better describe current practices and directions to improve upon existing practices. School psychologists' perspectives place them in a unique position to provide valuable information regarding student disability determination. The conclusion that emerged from an examination of their views suggests that extensive diversity in practices among states exist, and similarity and variability are present in school psychologists' conceptualizations of students. Limitations to this study include small sample size, lack of random assignment, and simplified data analysis of inter-rater agreement (kappa statistic was not calculated).

REFERENCES

- Mellard, D. F., Deshler, D. D., & Barth, A. (2004b). LD identification: It's not simply a matter of building a better mousetrap. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 27(4), 229-242.
- National Center on Learning Disabilities (2002, May). Maintaining rights—achieving better outcomes: Identifying and serving students with learning disabilities [Concept Paper.] New York, NY: Author.

Table 1
Percentage of Agreement Between Raters on Focus Group Question Themes

<u>Question</u>	<u>Percentage of Agreement</u>		
	Missouri	Minnesota	Louisiana
_ What contributes to variations in practices across schools and within districts?	100 %	86%	N/A
_ What are the strengths/weaknesses of the aptitude achievement discrepancy model?	50%	85%	N/A
_ How do LD students differ from students needing help?	92%	90%	N/A
_ Which is more important students who display evidence of learning disabilities or students in need of services?	80%	78%	N/A

Table 2
School Psychologists' Views by State of Those Factors That Contribute to "Variations in LD Practices Across Schools and Within Districts"

Louisiana, Minnesota and Missouri	_ Different criteria being implemented in different states and districts
Louisiana and Minnesota	_ How LD criteria interpreted _ Referral practices
Louisiana and Minnesota	_ Differences in services available in schools and districts
Minnesota and Missouri	_ Difficulties in distinguishing between LD kids and kids with learning problems
Louisiana	_ Degree of early intervention _ Quality of general education _ Finances and resources of school district _ LEA philosophy
Minnesota	_ Differences in data collection and interpretation _ Differences in who makes deciding decision _ How LD definition interpreted _ Whether regular education teacher adapts learning environment for LD students
Missouri	_ Reliance on professional judgment _ Parents who advocate to get their child services _ School expectations for students who come from low SES backgrounds _ Number of itinerant students _ Lack of consistency in applying criteria

Table 3
School Psychologists' Responses to the Question of "What are the Strengths and Weaknesses of the Aptitude Achievement Discrepancy Model?"

Strengths

Missouri

- _ You get the ability level
- _ Helps identify the unevenness
- _ Student performs poorly in class, performs well on achievement test; testing was important to avoid unnecessary labeling

Minnesota

- _ None identified

Weaknesses

Missouri

- _ Negative comments about students with LD label
- _ Assumes all children outside of SPED are average
- _ False positives
- _ Too much reliance on the numbers
- _ Tests match poorly with curriculum
- _ Students have to fail before they can be identified

Minnesota

- _ Difficult to identify discrepancy using instruments for younger students
- _ Standard scores don't help with demonstrating progress
- _ Frustration over finding the right IQ test because you need to establish the discrepancy criteria
- _ Students struggling in general education class don't get services because they don't have the discrepancy
- _ Not seeing the academic norms on standardized tests matching classroom performance
- _ Students have to fail before they can be identified

Table 4
School Psychologists' Responses in Missouri and Minnesota to the Question of
"How LD students Differ from Students Needing help"

Characteristics of Children Who Have Been Identified as Having a Learning Disability.

Missouri

- Unevenness in development.
- Unable to maintain motivation
- Need specific type of instruction
- Learn differently
- Discrepant learners.

Minnesota

- Underachievement.
- Disability is chronic, life-long disability.
- Even with supports still has difficulty in LD area.
- Disability has a severe impact on learning.
- Learn differently

Characteristics of Children who Need Help (e.g., slow learner)

Missouri

- Struggle in many subject areas
- Can eventually catch up academically with the right kind of instruction
- Struggle in most areas

Minnesota

- Have a curriculum disability rather than a learning disability
- Always struggling

Table 5
School Psychologists' Responses to the Question of
"Which is More Important, Students who Display Evidence of Learning Disabilities
or Students in Need of Services?"

Missouri and Minnesota

- Identification

Missouri

- Look at characteristics first; assume if going through process they need services
- We need to look at need for services
- Want help for every child

Minnesota

- Thrust of what we do is identification...which is on the wrong track...the end result is to provide support
- Not an issue because with quality interventions available to general education it allows you to determine there is a need at referral