

NASET LD Report #12

Learning Disability Identification: What You Need to Know about the Discrepancy and Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (“Third Method”) Models.

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The special education process for identifying a student with specific learning disabilities is one of the greatest challenges the parent of a child with specific learning disabilities can face. Not only do you need to understand how your district defines/identifies what a specific learning disability is, but you need to know how your child qualifies for special education services under their definition. This challenge arises because we do not have a hard and fast definition of a specific learning disability. You as a parent see that your child is not performing well in school. It would seem to be cut and dried that your child has a specific learning disability of some sort or another. However, there are many factors involved with identifying a learning disability, and not all academic problems are caused by a specific learning disability.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is called a “high incidence” or “high frequency” disability; that is, it happens a lot. Around 43% of all students identified as having a qualifying disability have been identified as having SLD. Typically, these students make up a solid 75-80% of the caseload of special education teachers who work with students who have mild to moderate disabilities. There is continual tension between, on the one hand, parents and teachers who often feel a student should be identified as having SLD, and, on the other, administrators and teachers who feel that students have been over-identified as having SLD. In this era of significant budget cuts in special education, SLD over-identification is a very real concern.

This means that you, as the parent of a child who may have a SLD, should have some familiarity with what the definition of what a SLD is and the methods by which it is identified in order to decide what is best for your child. Let’s look at two of the three identification models, the Discrepancy Model and the Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (Third Method) Models.

The third model, Response to Intervention, requires its own discussion due to its complexity and controversy.

First of all, what is a SLD? The simplest definition is that a child with a SLD is one that does not academically perform as well as one would expect given what we know about their IQ. The child may in fact be strong in one or more academic areas (Reading, Writing or Math) while struggling in others. A child with SLD has normal or above-normal intelligence (IQ 90 and above) but isn't performing in the classroom as well as that IQ would predict. Generally, the child is also weak in one or two specific academic areas. A child who is slightly below normal cognitively and weak in all academic areas technically should not be qualified as having a SLD. These children, with cognitive (IQ) test scores that fall between a standard score of 80 to 90, are considered to be "slow learners" rather than children with a disability. That's because the slow learning child is then viewed as performing up to his or her ability. The child is also not so low as to be considered intellectually deficient or intellectually disabled (cognitive scores of 70 or below, along with self-care problems and life skill problems). While the slow learner will benefit from additional academic support, those supports may not significantly increase the student's ability to perform at the same level of his or her peers. Academic supports should allow a student with SLD to perform at or close to his or her ability in a regular classroom.

This definition of what SLD is lies at the heart of the differences between the Discrepancy Model and the Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses Model.

In the **Discrepancy Model**, which has been a standard of identification for SLD for many years, students are tested to find an IQ. Then students undergo academic testing in the major categories that make up SLD. The IQ signifies what the student's potential academic performance ability is supposed to be. If the student's scores in a specific academic area are a minimum of fifteen to twenty-two points lower (1.5 to 2.0 standard deviations from the expected score range) than the IQ score, then the student is considered to be showing a *discrepancy in achievement* and has a learning disability in that specific area.

It seems to be straightforward, but the Discrepancy Model has its problems. First and foremost, there are questions as to whether it accurately identifies students with SLD. It has the potential to over-identify minority students and students whose first language is not English. It does not necessarily help specialists identify the specific cognitive areas which may underlie a student's failure to achieve. Students may qualify for services in one district but not in another, depending on the discrepancy score range a district decides to use. That said, the Discrepancy Model has managed to help at least some students who have benefited from the provision of special education services. It is just not as accurate and precise as we might wish it to be.

The **Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses (PSW) Model** could be seen as a refinement upon the Discrepancy Model. As used in the settings where I have applied it, the PSW Model is based upon testing which looks at specific cognitive areas rather than a single IQ. Besides looking at what the student already knows, this model takes factors such as Long-Term Retrieval, Short-Term Memory, Working Memory, Auditory Processing, Processing Speed and Phonemic Awareness into consideration. The student also undergoes the same sort of academic achievement testing that they performed under the Discrepancy Model.

Then the cognitive data is analyzed and the team (which includes parents as well as teachers) looks for *dual discrepancies*. Generally, the team wants to see a select number of cognitive (thinking) strengths (most commonly three), shown by scores that are average (90) or above. The team then looks at the number of factors that appear in the low range (80 or below). If no cognitive scores fall below 80, then the student is not considered to have a cognitive weakness and therefore does not have a learning disability. If the team finds a score of 80 or lower, then it examines the academic test scores that are associated with the cognitive area. For example, if a student demonstrates a weakness in the area of

Long-Term Retrieval, then the team will look for a matching weak academic score in the areas of Reading and Math. A matching score of 80 or below in that area qualifies the student as having a learning disability.

In other words, the **PSW Model** seeks to link academic disabilities with cognitive areas where the child shows a weakness. This should then give special education providers clues about how to help a child with their academic problems and focus more directly upon specific strategies, by associating performance problems with specific potential cognitive causes. This method shows much potential for improving our understanding of the patterns of specific learning disability and how best to treat it. It also has the potential to help you as the parent understand why your child thinks and behaves the way they do—and help them to succeed.

And, after all, isn't helping our children to succeed what it is all about in the long run?

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