

Assessment of Learning Difficulties

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Slavin¹Slavin, R. E. (1994). Educational psychology: Theory and practice. indicates that almost all children, regardless of social class or other factors, enter school for the first time full of enthusiasm, motivation, and self-confidence, expecting to succeed. Before the end of Year 1, however, some of them lose that confidence because they are not experiencing success. Lack of success reduces mastery orientation, weakens a child's feelings of self-efficacy, lowers self-esteem, and diminishes motivation²Westwood, P. S. (2004). Learning and learning difficulties: A handbook for teachers. Camberwell, Vic: ACER Press.. Linden³Linden 2002, p.76 states, 'Already in their first year in school some pupils will have had traumatic experiences of not being able to cope, [and] the loss of a feeling of competence can create unhappiness, fear and disappointment'. Teachers are held accountable for pupils' performance, sometimes to unrealistic levels – especially regarding children with learning difficulties⁴Ondiek, P. E. (1986). *Curriculum development: Alternatives in educational theory & practice*..

To prevent the above from happening, teachers need to know much more about human learning and the factors that can enhance or impede it. Teachers need to understand learners, learning processes, and learning difficulties. In most countries, the term *learning difficulty* is applied to learners who are not making adequate progress within the school curriculum, particularly in basic skill areas covering

language, literacy, and numeracy. Their problems may be associated with one particular school subject or may be evident across all subjects in the academic curriculum. For a variety of reasons, these learners do not find learning easy in school. The number of learners with such learning difficulties varies across schools and countries.

The prevalence rate has been reported as varying between 12 percent and 30 percent of the school population⁵Nakra, O. (2019). Children and learning difficulties. Notion Press.. Learners with these problems are therefore quite common in schools.

Screening to pinpoint learners with learning disabilities

Screening is carried out to identify those learners whose academic performance is poorer than expected. It may be that a learner is diligent in class (e.g., the first to answer questions) but does not perform well in examinations. Learning difficulties can begin to appear as early as the age of three. Therefore, **screening should take place as early as possible**, and the child should be routinely rescreened so they can avoid years of academic difficulty. Teachers should observe the child both in and outside the classroom (e.g., recess) and communicate their concerns with the child's parents or guardian(s)⁶Aro, T., & Ahonen, T. (Eds.). (2011). Assessment of learning disabilities: Cooperation between teachers, psychologists, and parents [African Edition]. Jyväskylä, Finland: Niilo Mäki Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.nmi.fi/fi/kehitysyhteistyö/materiaalit/learningdisabilities-book.pdf> .

Screenings should include vision and hearing tests to monitor any changes over time, and children with suspected vision or hearing loss should be referred for additional assessment and

services. Families can share relevant information about their child with their teachers (e.g., strengths and interests), as well as their expectations about their child's education⁷Aro, T., & Ahonen, T. (Eds.). (2011). Assessment of learning disabilities: Cooperation between teachers, psychologists, and parents [African Edition]. Jyväskylä, Finland: Niilo Mäki Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.nmi.fi/fi/kehitysyhteistyö/materiaalit/learningdisabilities-book.pdf>. Screening can then take place upon the recommendation of a family member or teacher. Such a learner may be singled out and referred for further diagnostic assessment.

Other potential causes of learning challenges should be ruled out before a learner is identified as potentially having a learning disability. It is especially important to rule out hearing and vision challenges before conducting a more comprehensive assessment. Learners with vision or hearing challenges may:

1. require frequent breaks due to fatigue;
2. have difficulty sustaining attention;
3. be unable to finish timed tests;
4. be unable to sit for long periods of time;
5. have difficulty with sitting or balance, maintaining posture, and/or arm-hand use;
6. have trouble answering questions;
7. have difficulty pointing at something or looking someone in the eye; and
8. have challenges communicating effectively⁸Farrall, M. L., Wright, P. D., & Wright, P. (2015). All about tests & assessments: Answers to frequently asked questions. Hartfield, VA: Harbor House Law Press, Inc..

These symptoms can be easily confused with signs of learning disabilities. Because many countries have not implemented routine hearing and vision screening, a teacher or trained

individual should conduct the vision and hearing screening to ensure that a learner's learning challenges are not related to low vision or difficulty hearing. Screening should also rule out other factors, such as environment or language, that might impact a learner's ability to achieve academic success. Those factors may make a student appear to have a learning disability. Ruling out external factors is especially important in situations where the language spoken in a learner's home may not be the same as the language of instruction at school.

In fact, some experts do not recommend assessing learners for learning disabilities if their first language differs from the language of instruction. They suggest that assessments for learning disabilities can only take place once learners clearly have a strong written and oral understanding of the primary language of instruction⁹Dunn, M. & Walker, T. (2008). Assessment of English language learners with disabilities. In Pawan, F. (Ed.), Helping English language learners succeed in middle and high schools. Alexandria, VA: TESOL Publications..

Gathering information concerning the child's development during assessment

During assessment, a picture must be formed of the child's skill development, the progress of their school learning, and earlier observed difficulties. Parents can often describe the child's early development, and further information can be found in child health records. Sometimes, there are signs of comparatively slow skill development in the child's developmental history. However, it is possible that the parents have not observed anything peculiar, or they do not recall any unusual characteristics in the child's development.

In such a case, it is the task of a professional to identify features in the parents' descriptions that may point to atypical or slow skill development. Hence, the parents' report of normal early development is not always a guarantee. The professional tries to identify the significant early characteristics of the child's problems and map out the development of the more slowly acquired skills.

Developmental steps, early signs of problems, and risk factors are mapped out according to the child's developmental history. Development data is information about, for example, the acquisition of motor, language, and social skills, and whether the child has developed according to expectations. Risk factors may be pre-, peri-, or postnatal complications, such as illnesses or accidents, which may have caused neurological problems or slowed development. It is also useful to map out the child's traumatic or stressful experiences (such as the death of a close relative or parents' divorce). These experiences can undermine the learning ability of some children, especially during the time of the highest stress.

It is also necessary to ask for information regarding the parents' and other close relatives' learning history. Often, the child's father or mother has had similar learning problems, and these characteristics have been passed down to the child. Information on how the earlier difficulties have been overcome or viewed in the family can help in understanding the significance of the child's difficulties for the family and in finding means for the family to receive assistance and reinforcement. Sometimes, poor instruction can cause problems with learning, and this should also be considered as we gather information about the child. Furthermore, it may be necessary to gather information about the child's academic history in terms of the frequency of changing schools. In some cases, the family is in denial about the child's learning problems: they believe that the child's poor performance is due to, for example, the failure of the

school to teach properly; hence, they move the child from one school to another, hoping to find one that will solve the child's problem.

Educational systems usually fail to meet the needs of the learner if the main goal of the educational planners is to simply classify learners into groups of good or poor performers. In Africa, some of the traditional problems with educational systems are:

- too much emphasis is placed on the subject matter, without considering learners' real needs, interests, problems, and abilities;
- the subject matter takes too little account of the needs of the society, the learner, and the economic and personal challenges of the learners;
- the systems are very rigid and do not take the dynamic nature of the society and the world into account;
- much educational practice is not in line with the needs revealed by research concerning child growth and development;
- the traditional curriculum is too academic, leaving little room for the consideration of learners' individual differences.

In connection with these issues, many educational systems do not consider developmental steps, early signs of problems, and risk factors in respect to learners. If a learner has been previously assessed, then the current assessors should obtain summary reports and copies of the previous assessor's test records. This eliminates unnecessary work, as the reports reveal valuable information already gathered. They also show the plans made and implemented to improve the situation, as well as how these have affected the child's development. When previously-obtained results are interpreted by the assessor carrying out the current examination, the significance of repetition in the results must be carefully considered, especially if one year or less has passed since the previous

assessment. In the assessment of the actual change in skills, descriptions of the significance of situational factors and familiarity with the characteristics of the test are useful.

Most of the psychological or neuropsychological tests used in Africa are adapted from foreign versions in order to enhance their validity and reliability. There also exist locally devised assessment profiles, screening tools, and checklists that meet international standards. It is hoped that, with a growing appreciation of the benefits of sharing knowledge, more collaborative research and development of materials will take place in Africa.

In Kenya and other African countries, possibilities for early identification do exist due to the rapid enhancement of services for children with special needs there; however, as awareness of such essential services is lacking, many children have not yet received them.

Assesment

Assessment is an ongoing process involving the collection of data for the purpose of evaluating the performance of a student. The classroom teacher is in the best position to provide information on a current basis. Data can be collected from observation, work samples, student portfolios, journal entries or logs, project work, interview results, daily or weekly tests, criterion-referenced tests, and standardized tests.

An assessment is a comprehensive procedure conducted by trained professionals (using detailed information) who try to identify or diagnose the cause of a learner's learning challenges, determine the severity of the disability, and identify targeted interventions. Information obtained through these assessments should also be used to help develop an individual educational plan (IEP) and set benchmarks for a learner's educational progress.

Assessment takes place upon completion of an initial screening.

A general screening must be conducted before a comprehensive assessment is carried out, because screenings can rule out other factors that may be confused with characteristics of learning disabilities. Assessments can be time-consuming for all members of the assessment team, so it is important that there is a suspected need before moving forward.

It is vital to use multiple assessment tools and sources of information.

No single tool or score is sufficient to determine whether a learner has a learning disability. Therefore, multiple tools and sources of information must be used to conduct an assessment. Although no best practice has been established in regard to how many tools should be used, at least two should be part of an assessment. The exact number will be determined on a learner-by-learner basis and in response to a learner's individual needs. The US education law for children with disabilities, notes that it is inappropriate and unacceptable to base any eligibility on the result of one procedure and that multiple tests and procedures must be performed¹⁰Weishaar, M. K. (2007). Case studies in special education law: No Child Left Behind Act and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.. Effective evaluations should assess all areas related to a learner's suspected disability, including 'health, vision and hearing, social and emotional status, general intelligence, academic performance, communication abilities, and motor skills'¹¹Farrall, M. L., Wright, P. D., & Wright, P. (2015). All about tests & assessments: Answers to frequently asked questions. Hartfield, VA: Harbor House Law Press, Inc. Furthermore, the type of information used to assess a learner can include 'background and family history, formal and informal testing, observations in the classroom and other settings, if appropriate; interview with family, teacher(s),

and the child; additional testing, depending on the presenting problem and the test findings'¹²Farrall, M. L., Wright, P. D., & Wright, P. (2015). All about tests & assessments: Answers to frequently asked questions. Hartfield, VA: Harbor House Law Press, Inc..

All tools for assessment must be adapted and standardized to include the local norms for the culture and language in which they will be used. Unfortunately, tools used to diagnose learning disabilities are often imported using Western norms. This practice 'raises ethical issues as a lack of sensitivity to cultural differences can result in misdiagnosis or mislabeling'¹³Aro, T., & Ahonen, T. (Eds.). (2011). Assessment of learning disabilities: Cooperation between teachers, psychologists, and parents [African Edition]. Jyvaskyla, Finland: Niilo Mäki Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.nmi.fi/fi/kehitysyhteistyo/materiaalit/learningdisabilities-book.pdf>. If tools have not been culturally adapted or are not available, assessors should develop, adapt, and pilot tools before conducting an assessment. During this time, learners can receive additional support in the classroom without having received a diagnosis.

It is important that a multidisciplinary team participates in all assessments to ensure a variety of perspectives. Core members of this team should include a learner's parents/caregivers, the general education teacher, and a school special education teacher. Where available, the equivalent of a school psychologist or social worker should also participate. Other experts who might be invited to join the evaluation team include speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, reading specialists, and others. At least one person on the team should be trained in how to conduct a comprehensive assessment and be able to lead the process. Another ideal team member is an educational expert who is familiar with the learner's ethnic and linguistic culture, if needed. In many instances, either a

school administrator or someone from the Ministry of Education will also participate in the assessment. The team may suspect that a learner has a specific learning disability, but only a trained clinical psychologist, school psychologist, educational psychologist, or neuropsychologist should make the diagnosis¹⁴Ross Kidder, K. (2002). Who can diagnose LS and/or ADHD? Retrieved from <http://www.ldonline.org/article/6027>. If these trained personnel are not available within a country, a learner with suspected learning disabilities should not receive an actual diagnosis but, instead, be given additional support. In this way, the learner will receive, at minimum, the required learning support, while the chances of being misdiagnosed or inappropriately labelled are reduced. Countries should, at the same time, work to build the capacity of in-country personnel to quickly fill the professional gap.

To assist teachers in identifying the children whom they perceive to be experiencing learning difficulties, general observations may be made in the classroom that are invaluable in helping to pinpoint characteristics, weaknesses, and strengths. Such observations will require the classroom teacher to be on the lookout for common behavioural characteristics of children with a specific learning disability (SpLD). Observation is the first step in the assessment process. Many common behaviours can be observed in children with an SpLD.

The teacher should begin by looking for learners who, when attempting to copy or write in class, are often unable to form letters properly, may start in odd places on the page, may appear to have difficulty copying from the board, and are generally slower than others to complete their work. Moreover, the teacher should look for learners who regularly have difficulty understanding what they have read and may be unable to follow directions easily. In addition, teachers should be aware of learners who display an inability to focus their attention for long periods or appear to be easily distracted.

Teachers should try to discern those children who have difficulties related to memory. Learners displaying these characteristics in class should be referred for assessment.

The assessment of learning disabilities and distinguishing these from learning difficulties caused by external factors is even more challenging in African countries than in developed ones. This increased challenge is readily seen in the results of ¹⁵Nepando (2003, who concluded that poor preschool services, poor teacher training and preparation, poor learner motivation, reading anxiety due to labelling, grouping, humiliation, and unfair treatment of poor readers and writers, resulting in emotional block, lack of support services to help teachers and parents with children who find it difficult to master literacy skills, overcrowded classrooms with no room for individual attention, and insufficient teaching and learning materials all affect literacy development amongst learners.

To understand difficulties in a child's learning, we must assess several factors that affect learning. By assessing the tasks and situations that cause difficulties, we can clarify what is necessary for the child to succeed in such tasks and situations. Assessing the development of the child's cognitive skills and emotional development helps to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Assessing the learning environment, on the other hand, tells us how the combination of the child's characteristics and the demands of the task and situation affect learning, as well as revealing what kind of support the child needs and the challenges they are experiencing. The goal of learning disability assessment is to produce knowledge of the different factors affecting children's learning and understand how they are interrelated.

In a learning disability assessment, information is synthesized from the child's developmental history, the phenotypes of the problems, and the environmental factors.

Light is also shed on the interaction of these factors. Successful learning disability assessment and support planning requires the close cooperation of the adults involved in the child's education. Among other factors, it helps those working with the learner to understand the following obstacles in learning:

- poor motivation or negative self-image as a learner: What has caused their negative development?
- difficulties in learning basic skills: What kinds of developmental problems are seen?
- a learning disability is seen on a functional and behavioural level, in the slow or abnormal learning of new skills.

Among school-aged children, difficulties may be seen as deficient skills in:

I) reading

II) spelling and writing

III) reading comprehension

IV) mathematics

V) problem-solving, and

VI) attention.

While studying a child's learning skills and knowledge, one should assess whether there are factors in the child's life that obstruct or hinder their learning.

Problems in learning

These problems may manifest themselves in daily situations of difficulties with schoolwork. A picture of the child's daily life and family situation can be formed by carefully gathering developmental information and evaluating the school and family situation. It is important to form as comprehensive a picture

as possible of the factors affecting the child's learning, for the sake of successful support planning. The following factors are examined:

- Problems in the child's emotional development and security;
- The effect of a family member's emotional problems (e.g., anxiety or depression) on the child;
- Violence in the family;
- Social/economic problems in the family; and
- Ambiguous daily routines at home or school, leading to insufficient support.

When a learning disability is not detected early, diagnosed correctly, and treated effectively, it can cause a number of other problems. These additional difficulties may be emotional, and a learner can show signs of sadness, frustration, or disappointment. Behavioural problems such as acting out might occur, or the learning problems may show up within the family, causing, for example, misunderstandings, increased stress, or the blaming of others. Studies show that among children whose families seek professional help for emotional or behavioural problems, 30–50 percent have learning disabilities¹⁶McInerny, T. K., Adam, H. M., Campbell, D., DeWitt, T. G., Foy, J. M., & Kamat, D. M. (2017). American Academy of Pediatrics textbook of pediatric care..

The identification of learning-related difficulties begins from when a teacher has a feeling or intuition that something may be wrong with a learner, or that a learner does not perform to their best ability. It is then the teacher's duty to investigate that notion in order to confirm or refute it. In such a case, initial identification of learning-related difficulties is primarily based on the intuition of the teacher. Intuition, however, is always based on knowledge and insight concerning the learner's educational situation.

Factors heightening a teacher's intuition include dedication

and empathy, which motivate the teacher's interest in each learner in the class. Teachers should never regard any worrying behaviour or comments by learners as coincidental; they should always try to relate them to possible problems that the child might be experiencing at school or at home, as these problems may affect the learner's development towards adulthood. However, teachers should take care not to misunderstand a learner either, as this could cause them to label the learner incorrectly as a person that the learner neither is nor wants to be. Teachers should therefore seek to find concrete evidence to support their intuition by systematically observing the child in different situations.

Sometimes, parents are the ones who suspect that their child has certain problems or special needs, leading them to mention these to the teacher for further investigation. Parents who are interested in their children are seldom wrong in their intuition about problems that their children might be experiencing. However, the combined intuition of both teacher and parents does not constitute sufficient grounds for a confirmation of the child's special educational needs.

Assessment reports

These reports are written by the assessment team after analysing and interpreting data collected during assessment. According to ¹⁷Ownby (1997) and ¹⁸Lichtenberger et al. (2004), the purpose of an assessment report is:

- to answer the referral questions raised by the teachers, parents, and guardians, among others, as explicitly as possible;
- to provide the referral source with additional information when it is relevant;
- to create a record of the assessment for future use; and
- to recommend a specific course of action such as the intervention measures to apply.

References

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