

Cognitive Profiles of Children and Youth Identified with Specific Learning Disabilities in a Response-to-Intervention Model

The term “learning disability” can be conceptualized in either a broad or narrow sense. In the broad sense, learning disability refers to children and youth who have difficulty learning in general, but do not have an intellectual disability. These individuals are often referred to as “slow learners,” because they need more time, repetition, and teacher resources than their peers to learn new concepts in all areas of academic achievement. Because these children and youth are learning *dis-abled* in general, their underachievement is expected. In contrast to broad sense conceptualization, learning disability in the narrow sense refers to children and youth who are unexpectedly underachieving. These are individuals who experience difficulty learning in some, but not all, areas of academic achievement, despite adequate educational opportunity, motivation, and general cognitive ability. These learning difficulties are typically specific to particular achievement domains, hence use of the disability category of specific learning disability (SLD) in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). The narrow sense conceptualization is the traditional definition of SLD.

With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, a provision was added allowing the use of response-to-intervention (RTI) methods to encourage the use of SLD identification procedures that are more relevant to classroom instruction. In addition to the examination of exclusionary criteria, determination of SLD is based on an academic performance discrepancy and inadequate rate of progress. According to the results of a recent survey, more school psychologists reported preference for the RTI method than any other approach to SLD identification (Maki & Adams, 2018). Shinn (2007) asserted that, “using a RTI model, it is not expected that different students will be identified as SLD than those identified historically” (p. 601). Reynolds (2009), however, argued that RTI will result in the over-representation of students with IQs at the low end of the normal distribution of intelligence. If correct, use of the RTI model represents a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of SLD from the traditional narrow sense to the broad sense, that is, from unexpected underachievement to expected underachievement. The aim of this study, therefore, is to examine whether the use of an RTI model results in the identification of students with different cognitive profiles than those identified traditionally.

Research Questions, Including Hypotheses to Be Tested

The aim of this study is to examine the hypothesis that the use of an RTI model to identify SLD results in the identification of different students than those identified historically.

Question 1: Does the use of an RTI model over-identify children and youth with normative (or population-relative) weaknesses in general cognitive ability (IQs < 90)?

Question 2: What are the cognitive profiles of children and youth identified with SLD in an RTI model?