A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT VIEW OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Second Edition

A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT VIEW OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

From Theory to Practice

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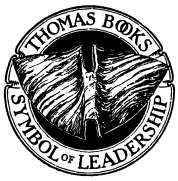

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
Springfield • Illinois • U.S.A.

Published and Distributed Throughout the World by

CHARLES C THOMAS • PUBLISHER, LTD.
2600 South First Street
Springfield, Illinois 62704

ISBN 0-398-07564-6 (hard)
ISBN 0-398-07565-4 (paper)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2004062124

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Printed in the United States of America
SM-R-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kass, Corrine E.
A human development view of learning disabilities : from theory to practice / by Corrine E. Kass and Cleborne D. Maddux.--2nd ed.
p. cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-398-07564-6 -- ISBN 0-398-07565-4 (pbk.)
1. Learning disabled children--Education--United States. 2. Lesson planning--United States. I. Maddux, Cleborne D., 1942- II. Title.

LC4705.K37 2005
371.9--dc22

2004062124

Dedicated to the memory of our parents

Richard and Alice Kass
Cleborne E. and Merle Maddux

PREFACE

The field of learning disabilities has grown tremendously in the past forty years. In 1966, the senior author moved to Washington, D.C. to head up a newly-created unit for funding teacher training programs in learning disabilities within the U.S. Office of Education. At that time, the term had just been adopted by a group that is now known as the Association for Learning Disabilities (ALD). School programs were unknown and the only literature came from clinical work with individuals with brain injuries.

Through the years, the field has gone through many stages of development, accompanied by professional and political schisms and by ongoing public misperceptions. At the same time, legislation made it possible for programs to be initiated and the literature has increased exponentially.

This book presents *a human development model for understanding and treating age-related deficits that seem to be characteristic of individuals with learning disabilities*. It is the culmination of years of clinical experience, qualitative research, and scholarship in the search for a framework that would be useful for the treatment of learning disabilities. Scholarly work in the field has been fragmented with few productive attempts to produce a taxonomy of existing hypotheses about critical characteristics. There are several overview textbooks in the field, but books that describe a connection between theory and practice are rare.

The ultimate purpose of this book is to present a strategy for designing day-to-day, individualized lessons for learning disabled students from kindergarten through adulthood. Although some other books do this, books in the field tend to be either broad surveys of various theories, or cookbooks of disconnected methods. This book includes (1) a historical perspective leading to an understanding of the influence of national, state, and academic politics influencing devel-

opments in the field, (2) a review of teaching in the field, (3) a review of selected theories in the field, (4) a review of selected research in the field, including research exploring and validating the particular model proposed in this book, (5) a description of a cognitive/ developmental model of learning difficulties, (6) diagnosis of learning disability as defined in this book, and, finally, (7) practical remedial approaches based on the model.

At this point, we feel compelled to say a few words about terminology used in this book. In recent years, it has become politically correct to eschew terminology such as *the learning disabled, learning disabled children,* and any other terminology not deemed "person-first." When pressed for reasons behind such a stand, proponents assert that the child is first and foremost a child and the disability should not be placed in the forefront of any reference to such a person. Therefore, almost the only terminology endorsed by those deemed politically correct is *children with learning disabilities.* Additionally, references to the condition as a *handicap* are prohibited on the grounds that such terminology is offensive to people with learning disabilities.

We are ambivalent about this trend. On the one hand, we have nothing against changes in terminology, which have occurred routinely throughout the history of all the helping professions. However, in the past, such changes have taken place slowly and naturally as knowledge about certain conditions increased, and such changes took place in an effort to be more descriptive and to improve communication among professionals and nonprofessionals.

However, the prohibitions against non*person-first* language and against the use of the term *handicap,* have often been forcefully imposed on the field by a small number of zealots. Some journal editors have refused to publish articles not employing the politically correct terms, and some publishers have required book authors to bring their language into compliance with the this new code before permitting the presses to run. This punitive approach is new, smacks of a "language police" function, and we view it as counter to the concept of academic freedom. Worse yet, it is mean-spirited and small-minded, and only serves to rub salt into the wounds created by several decades of bitter, professional bickering in the field of special education in general and in learning disabilities in particular. Perhaps worse of all, we believe that investing so much time and energy into punishing the use of politically incorrect terminology has deluded some pro-

fessionals into believing that they have materially improved the lot of children with learning disabilities. Regardless of the terminology used, what is needed is a better understanding of the nature of learning disabilities and methods that can help to remediate related problems or to compensate for them. In the final analysis, whether one says "learning disabled children" or "children with learning disabilities" is irrelevant to these infinitely more important goals.

Therefore, in this book, we will not attempt to standardize our language and make it politically correct. We will sometimes say "learning disabled children" and sometimes "children with learning disabilities" (from a strictly language point of view, there is no difference in the meaning). We will use "handicap" and "disability" interchangeably (If a learning disability does not constitute a handicap, then why would special education be required?).

This book is not meant to be an introductory textbook, but is expected to appeal to teachers, clinicians, researchers, and graduate students who are interested in considering the field from a particular point of view for a holistic approach to the task of identifying and educating persons with learning disabilities. Change in schools occurs mainly through political influences, such as federal legislation for the handicapped and wide public and professional support for the ideas of mainstreaming, the "regular education initiative" and full inclusion. Change due to increase in knowledge grounded in a particular framework appears to be almost nonexistent. While all knowledgeable perspectives contribute to what a professional does, it is not wise to be merely eclectic; one *must* have a framework. One such framework is presented in this book.

This book describes a cognitive model of developmental difficulties that interfere with learning, particularly school learning. The context for the model's use in the field of learning disabilities includes a historical perspective of the field, a review of teaching, theory, and research in the field, and a description of diagnosis based on the definition of learning disability used in this book.

The developmental model is based on a critical age view of learning and learning disabilities. At each age range, certain critical deficits characterize those with learning disabilities and remediation serves to ameliorate the deficits so as to make a more normal life possible. Instead of the long list of characteristics noted in most of the literature, this model contains only two or three critical characteristics for each

age range.

Research studies done at the University of Arizona served to refine the model and are described in the book. This research was programmatic in nature, starting with the question "What is learning disabilities, if there is such a condition?" The next questions were "How is that condition determined? and "What are the most effective treatments for the symptoms of the condition?"

At the time these studies were done, the research methodology was too *qualitative* for the field, which was heavily *quantitatively oriented.* The current resurgence of interest in qualitative research makes this book and its approach timely. There may be scholars in the field who are ready and willing to replicate some of the research methods, making it likely that we might find common ground for comparing operational definitions and for evaluating popular treatments.

The model proposed in this book also includes a task-requirement dimension. Just as we must understand the developmental characteristics within the learner, so too must the tasks which the human is expected to accomplish be age-related. The ability to provide appropriate remediation is the basic reason for understanding critical learning deficits in the first place. The latest studies in the programmatic research at the University of Arizona dealt with instructional application of the model and involved trying out lessons on children with learning disabilities (Maddux, 1977; Wade and Kass, 1986). Teachers in the field are always looking for improved ways of teaching students with learning disabilities. This book provides a practical framework for identifying critical characteristics shown by these students and gives practical sample lessons for use in alleviating critical deficits.

If there is value in this book, we hope and believe that it is not because it supplies a cookbook approach. Such approaches have been all too common in education in general, and in special education in particular. We are aware that the theory and the methods presented are not cut and dried statements and prescriptions. They indicate general directions and are not detailed roadmaps. We are aware, too, that the ideas are elusive and impressionistic, rather than straightforward and exact. We do not believe that the state of the art in any of the social sciences is sufficiently advanced to permit exactitude. Even if it were, we would probably not change the tone of our advice, since our purpose has not been to discover the truth about learning disabilities apart from specific children, specific teachers, and specific situations.

We hope we have presented a useful way to think about the problems of children. However, in our opinion, the teacher and his or her relationship with the child remains the key to learning. An inspired teacher can teach children intuitively and without conscious use of any theory whatever, and no amount of theorizing will serve to make a poor teacher competent. Perhaps that is because teaching still is, and always will be, more of an art than a science. In this book, we have attempted to make provision for both art and science.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to acknowledge our institutions, Calvin College and the University of Nevada, Reno, for providing the facilities and technology for producing this work. We wish to acknowledge our colleagues who helped in the development and research of this model: John Wissink, Jim DeRuiter, Charles Kaiser, Marilyn Johnson, Donald Deshler, Rena Lewis, Jan Schnorr, Richard Schamber, Michael Horvath, Joseph Wade, and Carol Swift. Special thanks go to Joe Wade, who has faithfully taught the application of the model to teachers in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Norfolk, Virginia, Jacksonville, Alabama, and Indianapolis, Indiana; to Marjorie Montague, a friend and researcher in the field of learning disabilities; and to Sharon Maddux, a teacher of adolescents with learning disabilities. And thanks, also to Karen Mahoney, a valued secretary, for her contributions. Finally, we are indebted to publishers, copyright owners, and authors for the many brief quotations.

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A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT VIEW OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Chapter 1

THE FIELD IN PERSPECTIVE

The field of learning disabilities has existed for several years. It now occupies an important place in both special education and regular education. It *is* a part of special education in that the laws of the nation and the states define the condition as a disability, but it has always been treated as something of a stepchild of regular education. This is ironic because with the present "inclusion movement" now in place throughout the nation, learning disabilities, of all the disability conditions, are the most prevalent in the regular classroom.

LEARNING DISABILITIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The term "learning disabilities" is entrenched in popular as well as in professional vocabulary. It is clear, however, that it has different meanings and contexts. While it is usually intended to refer to problems in reading, writing, arithmetic, thinking, talking, and social skills, it also often refers to various degrees and types of psychological processing deficits. Even though psychological processing deficits have been of great historical importance in the field of learning disabilities, current practices in many places have moved away from a recognition of their significance. For example, the most common identification procedure involves determining the discrepancy between actual and expected academic achievement. This approach ignores the psychological characteristics that puzzled parents and teachers in the first place and made it difficult to teach children with these characteristics in the classroom.

This sets the stage for tension between researchers and practitioners in defining the condition of learning disabilities. The incidence figures given by the practitioners include more individuals than some researchers are willing to define within the category. The conservative hard-liners wish to include only those who fulfill the criteria of a psychological or psychoneurological definition, whereas other researchers and practitioners in the schools take only the discrepancy between expected and actual achievement into account.

Due to federal and state legislation, classes and programs for students classified as having learning disabilities are required to be universally available. Unfortunately, the condition is generally considered a mild disability and is often lumped with mild mental retardation and behavioral problems for educational services. Instructional methods and materials used are often not specific to students with learning disabilities. The question must be raised about the necessity for classification if educational treatment is noncategorical in nature.

At the same time, research into characteristics and causation has produced classification systems of different subtypes of learning disabilities, some of which overlap with learning disabilities, or are defined as separate categories; e.g., Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Nonverbal Learning Disabilities. Recent research into neurological correlates of learning disability is providing some interesting information about different types of reading, writing, and arithmetic deficits.

While educational treatment has not always been specific to the condition of learning disabilities, research has been extremely varied in determining identification criteria for the condition and remarkably lacking in pointing the way toward effective educational treatments. Practitioners have been particularly resistant to changing methods as new knowledge becomes available. Researchers, however, have recently described a problem-solving system for identifying learning disabilities that is "based on failure to respond to intervention" (Fletcher, Morris, & Lyon, 2003).

Given the existing state of the field–its lack of specificity in definition and the schism between research and practice–this book seeks to challenge both teachers and researchers by presenting a functional model for understanding and diagnosing learning disabilities, and for designing remedial treatment based on the model.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIELD

How did this "field" come into being? Development occurred on two fronts: political and professional. On the political front, a major role was taken by special education through political means. While many professions deal with the problems associated with learning disability, special education has, through legal procedures, laid primary claim upon it as a category of disability. Professionally, development was marked by multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary efforts. Medicine, psychology, special education, optometry, occupational therapy, remedial reading, speech and language pathology; and, more recently, juvenile justice, vocational rehabilitation, and general education have all played important roles in the growth of the field.

Political Beginnings

Before the term "learning disabilities" appeared in any law, the problems connected with the condition were noted in clinics and private practice (Orton, 1937; Gillingham & Stillman, 1940; Fernald, 1943; Strauss & Lehtinen, 1947; Strauss & Kephart, 1955; Rabinovitch, 1959; Kephart, 1960; Delacato, 1959; Cruickshank, Bentzen, Ratzeburg, & Tannhauser, 1961; Frostig & Horne, 1964; Getman, 1962; Kirk & Becker, 1963; Gellner, 1959; and Haywood, 1968). However, little, if anything, could be found by way of identification, diagnosis, and treatment in the public schools where these children and their parents met with considerable frustration due to the lack of knowledge about the condition. Parents complained that their children were thought to be lazy or obstreperous.

In 1963, concerned parents brought about the organization of the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (ACLD), now known as the Association for Learning Disabilities (ALD). Samuel A. Kirk was influential in this organization from its inception, and when he was heading the Division of Handicapped Children and Youth within the federal government in 1964, he looked for ways to incorporate the concerns of this organization into federal funding practices.

In 1965, recognition of the category of learning disabilities was attained by placing it in the category of "crippled and other health impaired" within the existing definition of handicapped children. On the strength of that political maneuver, a separate Unit on Interrelated

Areas and Learning Disorders was created within the Division of Training Programs, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, U.S. Office of Education. In 1966, the term was introduced for use in pupil accounting by local and state school systems when it appeared in a handbook of the Terminology Compatibility Branch, National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Office of Education.

It was not until 1969, however, that the term appeared in the law through the passage of "The Children with Specific Learning Disabilities Act of 1969." The impact of this act was felt in a limited number of states that received federal funding for model demonstration centers. Technical assistance was provided by a Leadership Training Institute (LTI) at first located at the University of Arizona, and later at the National Learning Disabilities Assistance Project, Andover, Massachusetts. During the first year of that funding (1971–72), the LTI not only provided technical assistance, but surveyed the general state of the art (Bryant & Kass, 1972).

Papers concerning characteristics of the population, treatments, teacher training, and service delivery systems were written for the final report. While the implementation of this Act enhanced actual provision of school services for children with learning disabilities, research was not encouraged as much as it might have been. A Seminar of Scholars convened toward the end of the initial year of funding pointed this out, thus providing the impetus for the federal funding of five Research Institutes (Bryant, 1978; Bryan & Eash, 1978; Meyen & Deshler, 1978; Ysseldyke, Shinn, & Thurlow, 1978; and Hallahan, 1978).

Finally, with the passage of "The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975" (PL. 94–142), the term "learning disabilities" appeared as a separate category in all national laws concerned with handicapped children. This law mandated the "least restrictive environment" (LRE) for the handicapped, which is often interpreted to mean that children with such handicaps should be removed from special education services and placed in regular education classes. The popular term for this practice has been variously called "mainstreaming," "regular education initiative," or "inclusion."

For the category of learning disabilities, "inclusion" has always been the service of choice in the schools through the establishment of resource rooms supplementing regular classrooms. Unfortunately, in the years when the disability had no name, the only professionals will-