

Learning Disabilities Funding: Where Do We Go From Here?

TERRY WEST*
CAROL MILLSOM

Despite the recency of its recognition and funding, the field of learning disabilities is showing remarkable growth. Such growth may be an index of the great need in this area.

LEARNING disabilities is one of the most rapidly developing speciality areas within education today, a trend reflected in and stimulated by current federal funding patterns. This rapid development is particularly remarkable in view of the fact that the field was only officially recognized by educators during the past decade. The first description of a program for children now termed learning disabled was published only 15 years ago and the term learning disabilities itself was not introduced until 1963. Recognition at the federal level in the form of direct allocations for the education of learning disabled children did not come about until 1970.

The recency of federal interest in the learning disabled is less surprising though when it is realized that it was not until 1966 that specific allocations of federal funds were made to any group of handicapped children. The children who benefited from the

first allocations were those who had traditionally been considered handicapped: the mentally retarded, the blind, the deaf. Those who were learning disabled were not among them.

Federal support to the handicapped received considerable impetus in 1967 when the Bureau for the Education of Handicapped (BEH) was formed. This Bureau now coordinates the diverse functions pertaining to the handicapped formerly handled by the Office of Education and serves as a catalyst for federal action benefiting the handicapped. Realizing that the learning disabled had not been included in previous federal allocations, the Bureau was able to persuade Congress in 1970 to designate funds specifically for this group. As a result \$12 million were appropriated under Title VI to support research, training, and, most important, the establishment of model demonstration centers for the education of learning disabled children. These centers were to be responsible for test-

** Terry West, Graduate Assistant, and Carol Millsom, Associate Professor of Education, Special Education Program; both at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor*

ing and evaluating learning disabled children, developing programs best suited to their needs, and disseminating these new methods and techniques to other educational agencies. A Leadership Training Institute in Learning Disabilities composed of specialists was established to provide technical assistance to these newly established centers and to the field at large.

In establishing these centers BEH was primarily interested in stimulating local efforts to support programs for the learning disabled and expected local agencies to assume the operating costs of the centers once the initial funding was terminated. Excellent as these plans were, however, not a single dollar of the 12 million allocated for their implementation was released in 1970.

Funds Available at Last

Fortunately Congress was more generous the following year when one million of the \$20 million appropriated was actually made available for program development. Since that time the appropriations have increased to \$31 million and funds actually released have increased from \$2.25 million in 1972, to \$3.25 million in 1973 and 1974.

Although funds have increased they have not been adequate for full realization of the total plan. The million dollars made available in 1971 was sufficient only to fund eight model programs. Fifteen additional ones were established in 1972. Presently there are 43, but the Leadership Training Institute which was to provide technical assistance to the newly funded centers was disbanded last summer.

Despite funding limitations, these model centers have contributed greatly to the education of learning disabled children and for that reason it may be helpful to describe them here. Although there is considerable diversity among the model centers with respect to the educational approaches and staffing patterns employed, as well as the age groups served, there are also some important commonalities. First among these is the assumption that the learning disabled child should spend as much time as possible in a

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regular classroom with normal peers. To accomplish this, specially designed activities were presented in the classroom or, should he or she be removed, it was only for a brief period of intensive intervention.

Another assumption characteristic of these model programs concerned the importance of parental involvement in the remediation of learning disabled children's problems. Efforts to secure parental involvement have ranged from informing parents of program objectives and strategies to including them in special workshops and requesting their assistance in carrying out learning activities with their children.

Interdisciplinary Approach Featured

The employment of highly trained educational specialists from a variety of disciplines was another common feature of these programs. A staff typically included special educators, psychologists, speech pathologists, remedial reading specialists, and medical personnel. These interdisciplinary staff members not only evaluated and utilized existing instructional materials but developed new and innovative approaches to the remediation of learning disabilities. In implementing these new approaches, the majority of model centers utilized advanced educational technology. In some instances interactive computer programs focusing on diagnoses and remediation were employed; learning systems technologies were also used.

Finally, all centers have made an effort to disseminate information concerning successful program strategies, materials, and

techniques to other educational agencies and to assist them in setting up similar programs. This assistance has taken the form of providing in-service training sessions for administrators and regular classroom teachers and direct service through the use of project consultants as well as the publication of instructional materials and strategies. Educators who would like to learn more about these model centers should write to the special education division of their state department of education for information concerning the center nearest them.

Federal aid which made the development of the model centers possible may be described as non-categorical, that is allocations which were specifically designated for the learning disabled. Future support of programs for these youngsters, however, is more likely to result if the learning disabled can become eligible for what is termed non-categorical aid to the handicapped, that is general support for those with special educational needs which does not make reference to the specific disability areas.

Individuals who have personal and professional investments in the education of the handicapped have, for obvious reasons, favored congressional allocations specifically to the handicapped as the appropriate channel for support. They are aware that it is all too easy for the handicapped to be overlooked in the competition for general educational funds, especially in the tight-money economy which education faces today. But when this support is allocated on a non-categorical basis as aid to the learning disabled has been to date, there is the danger of funding cuts. The reason for this is that in a tight-money economy there may be a reluctance to grant support monies to those children who, be-

cause of the mildness of their disability or the covertness of their impairment, need services but are able to function at least marginally in regular classrooms, a group which includes the majority of the learning disabled.

Definition a Handicap

The obstacle the learning disabled face in becoming eligible for non-categorical aid to the handicapped is a definitional one. The term learning disabilities has not yet been defined in federal legislation to the handicapped. Responsibility for establishing an appropriate definition belongs, of course, to specialists not to legislators. But there is no consensus among specialists themselves about the meaning of the term. In reviewing the professional literature in the field, Samuel Clements has recorded 38 terms which are used synonymously with learning disabilities and, moreover, has found at least 100 symptoms which have been attributed to children given this label. The problem is due in part to the fact that specialists in the field are drawn from many disciplines each with its own terminology and theoretical perspectives. Another factor is the apparent popularity of the term. Many teachers and parents find it more acceptable to describe children as learning disabled who might formerly have been classified as retarded, emotionally disturbed, or culturally deprived.

This definitional confusion has serious consequences. It places legislators and educators in the position of not knowing how many children require services since these estimates cannot be made without adequate definition. And without these estimates it is difficult to determine the amounts of fund-

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ing necessary for the support of learning disabilities intervention. Moreover, this lack of definition has led to problems of diagnosis and prescription as well as to difficulties in the development of new materials, intervention strategies, and even to the inappropriate application of techniques already developed.

Toward a Clear Definition

If an adequate definition of learning disabilities can be included in federal legislation aiding the handicapped, the learning disabled will surely benefit. Several current bills attempt to do this or outline procedures for establishing a definition.

One example is Title VI B of P.L. 93-380 which grants aid to the states and encourages the expansion and development of direct local services. During 1973, \$47.5 million was appropriated as a result of this act in aid for handicapped children; the appropriation was doubled to \$99.6 million for 1974. Although this act provides aid to all areas of the handicapped, its priorities have implications for the learning disabled. First priority is being given to those children who are not currently receiving educational services, as for example the children in some institutions. The second priority of this law specifies allocation of aid to those children presently in school who are not receiving necessary special services. Given the current paucity of programs for the learning disabled, it is this second provision which will have a major impact upon the development of programs for the learning disabled.

Another example would be the revisions of the 1970 Developmental Disabilities Act presently being reviewed by Congress. Although the original bill made no reference to the learning disabled, current revisions include this group among those eligible for aid. Passage of this legislation is uncertain at the present time, but it is encouraging that both the House and Senate have passed their versions of the bill.

The impact of current federal legislation on the area will be manifold. Increased levels of funding will permit the extension of services to greater numbers of learning disabled children. In conjunction with the expansion of services the number and quality of university-based and in-service training programs will continue to increase to meet the increased needs of the field. Competent professional leadership personnel will be encouraged to involve themselves in the area. Academicians and specialists currently engaged in investigations of related areas will begin to shift their emphasis to the problems of the learning disabled.

The promise of increased federal appropriations for the handicapped is an offer to give hope to parents, teachers, administrators, and other professionals involved in the education of the learning disabled. The amount of monies actually released may prove a test of the optimism which the appropriations have inspired, for this is the true measure of congressional concern. For how much longer can services be denied to those children, who, through no fault of their own, are unable to partake of an opportunity to learn?

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