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Assessment of Reading and Learning Disabilities
A Research-Based Intervention-Oriented Approach

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Assessment practices for children with learning disabilities (LD) in reading are driven by the three primary components of the federal definition of LD: discrepancy, heterogeneity, and exclusion. This article reviews the implications of these three components for the assessment of children with reading disabilities and other forms of LD. We propose a rationale and procedures for more efficient approaches to the identification of children as learning disabled in reading or at-risk for these disabilities that are aligned with research on reading disabilities and other forms of LD. This approach emphasizes the assessment of academic skills and their components in an effort to develop intervention plans. Intelligence tests are not necessary for the identification of children as learning disabled and do not contribute to intervention planning. © 2002 Society for the Study of School Psychology. Published by Elsevier Science Ltd

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Over the past 30 years, considerable evidence has accumulated concerning how children learn to read and why some experience difficulties. This research has produced new insights into the nature of learning disabilities (LD) in reading and how such disabilities should be assessed, and has lead to new assessment procedures. However, procedures used to assess children in schools, especially as part of the determination of eligibility for special education services, continue to be dominated by conventional and, we

will argue, now obsolete interpretations of the federal definition of LD. The purpose of this article is to present a rationale and procedures for evidence-based approaches to the assessment and identification of children as learning disabled in reading or at-risk for these disabilities that are more efficient than current approaches. We suggest that assessments should be completed with a primary goal of enhancing intervention.

The article has three sections. The first section reviews the three major components of the federal definition of LD—discrepancy, heterogeneity, and exclusion—with an eye toward their implications for assessment. The second section discusses alternative approaches to assessment that are based on the emerging research base on reading development and reading disabilities, including a conceptual framework for assessment and applications to reading disabilities. The third section expands the discussion of assessment into the area of early identification and screening.

FEDERAL DEFINITION OF LD AND ASSESSMENT

The assessment of reading disabilities and other forms of LD has been heavily influenced by the federal definition of LD adopted by the U.S. Office of Education in 1969. This definition was continued when Public Law 94-142 was adopted in 1975 and is presently in its reauthorization as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1992 and 1997. Perhaps more important than the federal definition is the operationalization suggested by the U.S. Office of Education in 1977 and maintained in IDEA when states indicated that the federal definition of LD did not provide clear guidelines for identification:

> A severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of the following areas: (1) oral expression; (2) listening comprehension; (3) written expression; (4) basic reading skill; (5) reading comprehension; (6) mathematics calculation; or (7) mathematic reasoning. The child may not be identified as having a specific learning disability if the discrepancy between ability and achievement is primarily the result of: (1) a visual, hearing, or motor handicap; (2) mental retardation; (3) emotional disturbance, or (4) environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (United States Office of Education, 1977)

These criteria suggest that there are three essential components in the federal definition of LD: discrepancy, heterogeneity, and exclusion. Each of these components can be represented as hypotheses about how academic deficiencies should be classified, with different implications for assessment.

Discrepancy Hypothesis

According to the 1977 operationalization of federal definition, LD is indicated when a child exhibits a severe discrepancy between achievement and