
Educational Intervention Research

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

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Background for Concern

Appropriate educational intervention for children and adults with learning disabilities has long been a major concern of the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA). Parents and professionals are *bombarded* with many instructional approaches and procedures; however, they may find it difficult to determine which of these interventions would be appropriate for individual children at a particular time in their development or during adulthood. In order to address these concerns, LDA appointed an Educational Research Committee.

The first committee activity was a survey of literature regarding intervention research. This survey indicated that much of the early research in learning disabilities was descriptive because there was a need to identify the problems and to determine whether children with learning disabilities differed from normally achieving children. At the same time, many intervention approaches were developed, but few were research based. In order to strengthen the research base in the field, the US Office of Education, funded five institutes in the 1970's, some of which included intervention (Kneedler & Hallahan, 1983). A review of ten years of academic intervention for students with learning disabilities conducted by Lessen, Dudzinski, Karsh, and Acker (1989) indicated that less than 4% of the articles they reviewed (119 out of 3,106) were related to intervention. In recent years, several follow-up studies have been conducted to describe the adult outcomes of learning disabilities, but few have included controlled investigations of intervention. Recognition of the need for better intervention research was expressed by the Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) within the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) in a monograph in 1990 (Scruggs & Wong, 1990). More recently the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has funded new centers on intervention which are investigating various approaches to reading (decoding) and writing. However, more controlled studies are needed in other areas of learning. Although there is an increase in the number of intervention studies, many are often short term, focus on only one aspect of learning, and include poorly described groups. Consequently, little is known about the effectiveness of various procedures for specific individuals.

Researchers within the field of learning disabilities have expressed numerous concerns about the lack of specific subject descriptors in studies such as levels of mental ability, socio-economic status, various areas of achievement, and other demographics. However, detailed descriptions of the intervention procedures and other aspects of the student's educational program and special services are also needed if we are to know what works for whom in a particular setting.

In order to further examine issues and problems associated with intervention research, the LDA committee decided to obtain perspectives from several scholars who are conducting studies on instruction for students with learning disabilities. They were invited to a symposium and asked to address a set of questions developed by the LDA Educational Research Committee members. The participants were: Jeannette Fleischner, EdD, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York; Douglas Fuchs, PhD, Vanderbilt University, Nashville; Robin Morris, PhD, Georgia State University, Atlanta; Joseph Torgesen, PhD, Florida State University, Tallahassee; Sharon Vaughn, PhD, University of Miami, Coral Gables; and Naomi Zigmond, PhD, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh. The papers from the symposium, a summary of the discussion, and suggested directions for the future generated by the committee are included in this issue.

Each speaker addressed the same questions from his/her perspective. The first three questions focused on terminology related to service.

What is educational intervention in learning disabilities? Please address the question: *What is teaching?*

What are the distinctions between *intervention*, *remediation*, *tutoring*, and *accommodations*?

How should educational intervention in learning disabilities differ from regular classroom instruction?

In discussing these questions, terms such as *tutoring* and *intervention* are sometimes used synonymously, but have different meanings to various people. Questions regarding accommodation versus intervention were also raised.

The next three questions related to ethical issues, research design, and the measurement of change.

What are the optimal characteristics of intervention research for students with learning disabilities? The symposium participants were asked to include a discussion on design, measurement issues, the study of change, subject selection, appropriate control groups, description of the educational intervention procedures, the context in which instruction takes place, and other aspects of the student's instruction including related clinical services.

What are the best ways to create more replicable research?

What ethical issues need to be considered when conducting learning disabilities intervention?

The last two questions focused on the barriers to conducting intervention studies and the problems in disseminating relevant findings to researchers, educators, and parents.

What are the threats to validity and barriers to conducting such intervention studies?

How can validated intervention studies best be disseminated?

Each speaker's response to these questions follows in a set of six papers which make up this issue of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*.

References

- Kneedler, R. D., & Hallahan, D. P. (1983). Research in learning disabilities: Summaries of the Institutes. *Exceptional Education Quarterly*, 4(1).
- Lessen, E., Dudzinski, M., Karsh, K., & Acker, R. V. (1989). A survey of ten years of academic intervention research with learning disabled students. Implications for research and practice. *Learning Disabilities Focus*, 4(2), 106-122.
- Scruggs, T. E., & Wong, B. Y. L. (Eds). (1990). *Intervention research in learning disabilities*. New York: Springer-Verlag.