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# Literacy and Adults with Severe Learning Difficulties in Reading

## Preface

Approximately 27 to 35 million adults in the United States are unable to read a newspaper or write a letter. Many of these adults may have a learning disability, as this condition affects approximately 10% of school-age children and does not necessarily disappear as these children reach adulthood. The awareness that learning disabilities in adults exists is recent, even among professionals in the field, primarily because this condition has been perceived as a problem of childhood. Moreover, the extent to which a learning disability in an adult may affect opportunities in higher education, vocational opportunities and employment, interpersonal relationships, and emotional status are just being discovered. Service providers and educators in social service and mental health agencies, in vocational rehabilitation, and in adult education and literacy programs need to know more about learning disabilities in adults, and how to identify and provide them with appropriate support services and educational intervention.

The current national emphasis on literacy in the United States has involved federal, state and local agencies in the teaching of literacy skills to over three million adults, approximately 10-15% of the population, considered seriously deficient in reading (Newman, 1994). These adults are enrolled in adult education or literacy programs held in many different kinds of settings including schools, libraries, churches, synagogues, business offices, and factories. Estimates of adults with learning disabilities in these programs range from 20 to 80% (Bursuck, Rose, Cowens, & Yamaya, 1989; Minskoff, Hawks, Steidle, & Hoffmann, 1989). The majority of instructors are teachers but other instructors are volunteers. Often, instructors in both of these groups have had little if any training in teaching adults with learning disabilities.

The number of adults seen by learning disability specialists is minuscule compared to the number of adults enrolled in adult education or literacy programs. Most learning disability specialists have little or no contact with those teachers and volunteers who work with adult poor readers. There is much knowledge and experience that these groups can share.

There is a need for agencies dealing with literacy and general adult education to know more about learning disabilities in adults; more specifically

- to be aware that some of the adults in literacy and basic education programs have learning disabilities in reading
- to become knowledgeable about adult characteristics of learning disabilities
- to identify those adults in their programs who have learning disabilities
- to determine the most appropriate kind of instruction possible for adults with learning disabilities
- to address the needs of these adults to cope with and compensate for their particular learning difficulties.

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This issue of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal* focuses on Literacy and Adults with Severe Learning Difficulties. This theme reflects the topic of a conference held specifically to bring together individuals prominent in the fields of adult literacy, adult education, and learning disabilities. The purpose of the conference was to share ideas and experiences about adults with severe learning disabilities in reading (i.e., at or below a third grade reading level) and to draft recommendations related to their multidimensional needs. The conference was held at Teachers College, Columbia University and was sponsored by the University Affiliated Program and the Adult Literacy Program at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in collaboration with Teachers College, Columbia University and the New York City Literacy Assistance Center. It was supported through a grant awarded to Albert Einstein College of Medicine by the Barbara Goldsmith Foundation.

The conference was divided into sessions covering the following areas and related issues:

- adults with severe learning difficulties as perceived by literacy and learning disability specialists
- identification and evaluation of the target population
- the design of instructional programs, teaching strategies, and materials
- support services for the target population.

The closing session produced recommendations for the development of an action plan and policy formulations.

The papers presented here represent both research and practical concerns related to adults with low literacy skills and learning disabilities. Ruth Gottesman provides an overview of learning disabilities in adults as reported in the literature. Norman Brier reviews research about the emotional and behavioral characteristics of adolescents and adults with learning disabilities. Jeanne Chall describes a university-based program where literacy services are provided to adults. She focuses on characteristics of two groups of clients; those who are non-native English speakers, and those who have learning disabilities. Rosa Hagin, John Kugler, and Nancy Ellsworth present a model for diverse assessment strategies for a population of adults with severe learning disabilities. Doris Johnson discusses the development of effective intervention programs for adults with learning disabilities and low levels of literacy. Anabel Newman provides an overview of programs available to adults who are seeking to improve their literacy skills, emphasizing the similarities and differences among adult basic education (ABE), General Education Diploma (GED), employer or union-sponsored, volunteer, community college-based, and other higher education-based programs.

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Guest Editor

## References

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