

“Specific Learning Disabilities” in the United States and “General learning difficulties” in Australia

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1. Introduction

This paper will reevaluate the concept of Specific Learning Disability (SLD), a diagnostic criterion used mainly in the United States, and its weakness in comparison with General Learning Difficulty, a criterion implemented in Australia to effectively support children both with learning disabilities and with mild-borderline mental retardation. In this paper, we will point out that the Australian model has more advantages than the U.S. model and presents better examples for the future improvement of Japanese education and social welfare systems.

2. The definitions and issues of “mild mental retardation” and “learning disability” in the United States

According to DSM-IV-TR, “Learning disorders are diagnosed when the individual’s achievement on individually administered, standardized test in reading, mathematics, or written expression is substantially below that expected for age, schooling, and level of intelligence. ...

‘Substantially below’ is usually defined as a discrepancy of more than 2 standard deviations between achievement and IQ¹⁾”. In this definition, SLD, learning disorders is not associated with mental retardation. However, in the current U.S. educational systems, most of the students with mild mental retardation seem to have been identified as having SLD instead²⁾. Statistical data provided by the U.S. Department of Education indicates that the number of school-age children diagnosed with mental retardation had decreased by 40% during the period between 1976-77 and 1994-95. On the other hand, the number of students with learning disabilities during the same period had greatly increased (as much as by 207% according to some estimates³⁾. It is highly unlikely that the population of individuals with mental retardation had actually fluctuated as significantly as this data suggests. Likewise, it is also doubtful that SLD has been accurately and effectively diagnosed. So it would seem that strict application of the definition of LD in the

United States has been virtually abandoned. In fact, there is an author who acknowledges the over-identification of student with, indicating that many students with mild mental retardation and with other reasons for low achievement are being included⁴⁾.

3. The concept of Learning Difficulty in Australian educational systems

After conducting research on SLD utilizing the discrepancy model established by DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)⁵⁾, Australian educational systems (mostly in Queensland) concluded that only 3-5% of those who had been diagnosed with SLD actually had such a disability⁶⁾. Since then, Australia has established a new criterion that includes all learning impairments including SLD and classified it as General Learning Difficulty. Twomey further identified different types of Learning Difficulties based on three models, such as a) the deficit model which includes intellectual disabilities, visual and auditory disorders, dysfunctional family situation, and health problems, b) the inefficient learner model, and c) the environment factors model (most significant of which is the quality and appropriateness of the teaching that an individual receives⁷⁾. Approximately, 16-20% of all students are estimated to have some types of General Learning Difficulties⁸⁾.

4. Conclusion

Future improvement of the Japanese Special Education programs requires a shift from the U.S. model (based on Specific Learning Disability criterion) to the Australian model (based on Learning Difficulty criterion).

The over-identification of SLD in the United States might have been a result of the stigma attached to the term "mental retardation". However, this trend has also given confusion to what SLD really is. Since the introduction of the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Response to Intervention (RTI) as an alternative to the discrepancy model has widely been utilized to identify and to provide special education to learning-impaired students. Meanwhile, the diagnostic term "Specific Learning Disability" has never been modified⁹⁾¹⁰⁾. The problem is that the cases of mild mental retardation have so often been misdiagnosed or misidentified as SLD, and this has made "specific" disability into a very vague, general disorder. Once a student with mild retardation is diagnosed with SLD, he/she will be bound to follow a special education program designed for children with SLD, most of whom have reading disability, without having a chance to receive proper education purely designed for children with mental retardation, that is the training aimed for the improvement of the both aspects of intellectual disability and the problems of adaptive behavior¹¹⁾. This will bring further

disadvantages to the future of those individuals when they need to seek employment and social welfare benefits in their adulthood.

In dealing with these concerns, Australia introduced a new concept of “General Learning Difficulty” to improve the effectiveness of its special education programs. While the term SLD will continue to be used in Australia, it will have to be diagnosed carefully and correctly according to DSM. As an educational term, General Learning Difficulty shall be used rather than SLD. Meanwhile, the children with mild mental retardation are provided with appropriate educational programs that suit their circumstances more effectively. Along with mild mental retardation, disorders with learning problems because of other reason, included in Learning Difficulty criterion, further expanding the spectrum of special education. It is our conclusion that Japanese Special Education systems have much to learn from this innovative model, so that so-called “forgotten generation”¹¹⁾ will not emerge in Japan as it did in the United States.

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