

## **Shining a Light on the Importance of Increased Accessibility to Learning Disorder Testing and Diagnosis**

Have you ever had a simple, everyday task that you needed help completing? Tying your shoes, reaching something on a high shelf, opening a jar. For most of my life, that task was reading. Testing and diagnosis for learning disorders need to be much more accessible to all students, no matter past academic achievement. All students should be thoroughly tested for learning disorders multiple times throughout their years of standard education.

During my elementary school career, I worked with two different reading and writing tutors. Even though I have needed extra support in reading and writing since I was in kindergarten, I was only formally tested for a learning disorder last winter. Unfortunately, my story is not unique. It is also the story of millions of children across the United States. As many as 1 in 5 U.S. children have learning and thinking differences like dyslexia and ADHD (Horowitz). Worldwide, it has been repeatedly suggested that over 10% of the entire human population is affected by a learning disorder (Cicerchia). But despite these substantial numbers, only a small fraction of those affected are actually getting the correct support they need to be successful.

This might be because of the enormous stigma that society has placed around learning disorders. 33% of classroom teachers believe that the challenges faced by students with learning disorders are sometimes just laziness and 43% of parents say that they wouldn't want others to know if their child had a learning disorder (Horowitz). Much of this stigma stems from the false belief that learning disorders have anything to do with an individual's overall IQ or intelligence. A learning disorder is an "information-processing problem that prevents a person from learning a

skill and using it effectively” (“Learning disorders: Know the signs, how to help”). It is a neurological difference in the way that someone’s brain processes, stores, and communicates information (Cicerchia). In reality, learning disorders generally affect people of average or above-average intelligence (“New to LD – Learning Disabilities Association of America”). Even when basic reading skills are mastered, children with learning disorders may have difficulty reading at a typical pace, understanding or accurately recalling what they have read, making inferences based on their reading, and spelling (“Learning disorders: Know the signs, how to help”). But, what makes learning disorders so difficult to diagnose is that they vary in severity and presentation from one individual to another (Cicerchia). So, key signs that a student has a learning disorder may easily be overlooked, especially if that student has been doing seemingly fine in school.

While searching for information to write this piece, I couldn’t find a single source that explained any type of clear, logical process that had been implemented in schools to thoroughly test all students for learning disorders. Instead, it was repeatedly written that if there are concerns about a learning disorder, a student’s parent or teacher can request an evaluation (“New to LD – Learning Disabilities Association of America”). The problem here is clear. If a student is performing at an acceptable level in school, there will never be concerns that they have a learning disorder and they will in turn never get tested.

This is a huge problem because early intervention is essential when it comes to learning disorders as problems can easily snowball (Horowitz). Learning disorders are life-long impairments that may impact all areas of an individual’s life (“What Are Learning Disabilities?”). So, identifying them and determining strategies to help deal with them earlier on

is critical. Among children who struggle with reading and language skills, three-quarters of them who don't receive help until third grade will struggle with reading for the rest of their lives. But, if those same kids receive appropriate help by first grade, 90% of them will achieve a normal reading ability ("New to LD – Learning Disabilities Association of America"). Undiagnosed learning disorders can affect an individual's career choice and limit job advancement (Cicerchia). They can also lead to depression, low self-esteem, performance anxiety, chronic fatigue, and loss of motivation (Cicerchia).

The percentage of undiagnosed or unreported cases of learning disorders is said to be extremely high in adults, with as many as 1 in 6 adults struggling with reading (Cicerchia). 60% of adults with severe literacy problems have undetected or untreated learning disorders ("New to LD – Learning Disabilities Association of America"). Students with learning disabilities are two times as likely to be suspended and three times as likely to drop out of high school (Horowitz). Lastly, up to a quarter of inmates in the U.S. prison system are functionally illiterate because of undiagnosed learning disorders (Cicerchia).

Overall, what I hope can be taken away from this piece is that a new, structured system needs to be put in place in our schools that tests all students for possible learning disorders, regardless of past academic performance. Students should be tested for learning disorders multiple times throughout their years in the public school system in case certain signs are missed. The sole determining factor as to if a student gets tested for a learning disorder should never again be the judgment of a parent, the judgment of a teacher, and or a judgment of a student's academic history. Learning disorders are much more prevalent in our world today than many of

us realize and it is all of our jobs to take away the stigma associated with these types of disorders and help those who need it get the support that they need and deserve.

## Works Cited

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