
Empowering Students with Learning Disabilities in the Canadian Postsecondary Educational System

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Abstract

Large numbers of students with learning disabilities (LD) are now seeking postsecondary education in Canada. Many of these students are not prepared for the personal and academic challenges associated with higher education because their disability self-awareness level and self-advocacy skills have not been adequately developed. This article describes some of the problems confronting students with LD at Canadian postsecondary institutions today and presents options that counsellors, educators, and other professionals might consider to better prepare students with LD for success. Issues related to early identification and acknowledgement of LD are emphasized as ways of empowering students with LD to develop the personal tools necessary for success in the postsecondary environment.

Résumé

Un grand nombre d'étudiants ayant des troubles d'apprentissage veulent maintenant poursuivre une éducation postsecondaire au Canada. Plusieurs de ces étudiants ne sont pas prêts à faire face aux défis personnels et académiques que présente une éducation supérieure. Leur connaissance de soi et leur habileté à se promouvoir eux-mêmes ne sont pas suffisamment développées pour surmonter ces difficultés. Cet article décrit certains des problèmes vécus aujourd'hui par des étudiants ayant de troubles d'apprentissage dans des institutions d'études postsecondaires canadiennes. Il présente aussi des choix que les conseillers, les éducateurs et d'autres professionnels pourraient prendre en considération dans le but de mieux préparer ces étudiants à un succès. Les problèmes reliés à l'identification précoce et à la reconnaissance des troubles d'apprentissage sont soulignés comme des façons d'habiliter ces étudiants ayant des troubles d'apprentissage à s'outiller eux-mêmes de telle sorte qu'ils puissent obtenir du succès dans un environnement postsecondaire.

The number of students with learning disabilities (LD) has increased dramatically over the past decade (Hallahan, 1992); and a growing proportion of this population is now seeking postsecondary education (Ryan & Price, 1992; Taves & Hutchinson, 1993; Stewart, Ness & Rudyk, 1993). The population of students with LD has risen to the point where it now comprises the largest single group of students with disabilities on most campuses in the United States (Mangrum & Strichart, 1988) and Canada (cf. Reekie, 1993; Stewart et al., 1993). As a result, counsellors and other student affairs professionals are being called on with increasing frequency to provide a variety of academic and support services to postsecondary students with LD (Price, Johnson & Evelo, 1994; Spillane, McGuire & Norlander, 1992; Stewart, Cornish & Somers, 1994; Stewart et al., 1993). Our goal in this article is to provide a perspective on the

particular problems encountered by students with LD in the Canadian postsecondary context and discuss ways that counsellors, educators, and other professionals might empower these students by facilitating the development of personal skills necessary for success in the pursuit of higher education.

Identifying learning disabilities in adults

Although the term *learning disability* has entered common parlance, there is still much confusion surrounding the term and its implications. Professional associations and national associations for individuals with learning disabilities have adopted a model of LD based on identification of a significant discrepancy between an individual's overall level of intellectual ability and his or her achievement in any of several areas, including attention, memory, reading, writing, spelling, calculation, or social-emotional competence (American Psychiatric Association, 1994; Hammill, 1990; Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 1994). These associations also endorse the view that LD is due to central nervous system dysfunction and occurs only in individuals with at least average intellectual ability. According to these standards, LD is usually identified on the basis of a comprehensive interview and an analysis of the student's pattern of results on a battery of psychological and psychoeducational tests (Stewart, 1994; Whyte, Kovach & Vosahlo, 1991).

This conceptualization of LD has been subject to criticism on several grounds. First, although there is some evidence that forms of LD may be associated with central nervous system dysfunction (e.g., Bigler, 1992; Flowers, 1993; Rourke, 1988), specific etiologies and strict diagnostic criteria have yet to be identified and validated. The central focus on an aptitude-ability discrepancy has also been criticized because of the imprecise and incomplete nature of psychometric cognitive and intellectual assessment (Stanovich, 1993). Finally, concern about the possible stigmatization of an individual with LD (e.g., Eggert, 1988) due to a "labelling" effect (cf. Scheff, 1966; Szasz, 1960) has led to caution in applying the LD diagnosis to students in early grades.

The climate of uncertainty surrounding the identification of LD has led to disagreements among educators, service providers, and policy makers about how best to respond to the needs of students with LD. Professionals working with this population have therefore had to adopt a variety of compromise positions based on their values, experiences, and resources. The need to identify options that will better prepare students with LD for success at the postsecondary level may be more clearly understood after examining some of the common difficulties associated with the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

The challenges of postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities

Students making the transition from secondary to postsecondary education face a number of challenges. Although every student needs to make adjustments in academic, social, and emotional functioning to cope with the demands of postsecondary education (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994), students with LD often have considerably greater difficulty making these adjustments (cf. Stewart et al., 1994; Taves & Hutchinson, 1993).

Perhaps the most significant challenge facing students with LD in the postsecondary system today is increased academic demands. Instructors at this level expect a greater degree of academic proficiency than secondary school teachers, and competition among students is heightened accordingly. Along with this, significantly less time is spent in the classroom or in contact with the instructor, and greater emphasis is placed on the student's own independent reading and study (Brinckerhoff, Shaw & McGuire, 1992). This places students with LD who rely on a highly-structured and extrinsically-controlled environment for organization or motivation at a distinct disadvantage because of reduced support in these areas.

Another area of concern for postsecondary students with LD involves their capacity for social adjustment. The self-doubt, lack of self-confidence, and extreme self-criticism found among some university students with LD (Gregg, Hoy, King, Moreland & Jagota, 1992) may put them at risk for isolation, loneliness, and homesickness as they leave behind previously established social contacts and supportive relationships and enter the large and complex postsecondary environment. In addition to increasing the possibility of dropping out (cf. Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994), poor social adjustment may also increase the risk of secondary psychological problems such as depression and suicidality in young adults with LD (Rourke, Young & Leenaars, 1989).

The picture for students with LD seeking higher education is further complicated by developmental issues related to identity, self-concept, and life goals that young adults face during the transition from secondary to postsecondary education (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). Students who are unable to successfully resolve these issues are prone to experience emotional turmoil or crises. If such emotional distress is not resolved, students with LD appear to be at increased risk for anxiety, depression, or somatic symptoms, along with lowered self-esteem and other difficulties requiring counselling support (Huntington & Bender, 1993). Given these challenges, it is evident that successful preparation of students with LD for postsecondary education requires a multifaceted approach incorporating academic, personal, and systemic interventions (cf. Price et al., 1994).

Responding to the challenges of postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities

Despite general agreement across Canadian postsecondary institutions that students with LD are entitled to supportive services (cf. Hill, 1992), the onus for formally identifying, requesting, and justifying service needs ultimately rests with the students themselves. Reasons for this include the emphasis on autonomy and personal responsibility valued by most postsecondary institutions, individual variability in faculty members' willingness to provide accommodations (e.g., Nelson, Dodd & Smith, 1990), and inconsistent development of relevant disability service policies (cf. Hill, 1992). One way to prepare students with LD for the increased responsibilities they assume in attempting to secure service at the postsecondary level is to pursue a program of early identification and acknowledgment of LD throughout all levels of the Canadian educational system.

Although the use of psychometric testing to identify LD has been subject to criticism (e.g., Stanovich, 1993), Canadian postsecondary institutions usually require professional documentation before providing program modifications to compensate for LD (Hill, 1992). The information typically requested by these institutions includes a diagnostic assessment specifying the nature of the disability, the student's academic and cognitive strengths and weaknesses, and the recommended program modifications for the student's learning needs (LDAC, 1994; Stewart, 1994; Whyte et al., 1991). When this information is available, identification of program modifications should be a relatively straightforward matter for disability services personnel (cf. Scott, 1994). If such information is not available, however, students may have to wait for the provision of disability-related services until a current diagnostic assessment can be completed. This means that they will likely be operating at a distinct disadvantage in many of their courses. It is also possible that documentation required at this stage in their lives will have to be paid for out of pocket, which can place a considerable financial burden on a struggling student.

In addition to qualifying students with LD for subsequent program modifications, early diagnostic assessment also provides valuable educational planning information. Since much of the current effort to promote success for students with LD at the postsecondary level focuses on identification of appropriate program modifications or accommodations for the students' information-processing abilities (cf. Brinckerhoff et al., 1992), a well-documented history of these abilities can facilitate a smoother transition to postsecondary education by guiding service providers to select the most appropriate accommodations at this level. The accommodations themselves may involve a wide range of classroom modifications or technical aids designed to allow students with LD to utilize

their cognitive strengths to compensate for their relative weaknesses (Stewart et al., 1993). Common types of accommodations include extended time limits for exams, private exam writing space, tape-recorded lectures, note-taking assistance, access to computers, and alternative exam formats (cf. LDAC, 1994). The aim of such accommodations is to ensure that students with LD have an opportunity to demonstrate their academic achievement in a manner that minimizes the impact of their disability. In this way, the educational playing field is levelled and students with LD have the same opportunity to compete as their peers without disabilities.

Another advantage of early identification of LD is that it may reduce the likelihood of self-denigration. Postsecondary students with LD who have not been formally tested for LD earlier in their lives may have never had their learning disability identified as such. As a result, there is a significant risk that they will not clearly understand how or why they learn differently from their peers. This could lead to the internalization of negative self-messages that may adversely affect levels of self-esteem and self-confidence (cf. Huntington & Bender, 1993; Polloway, Schewel & Patton, 1992; Weinstein, 1994). Such a view is supported by recent research suggesting that lowered self-concept may be less predominant in adults with LD who have had their learning disability identified at an early age and consequently received special education assistance throughout their schooling (Lewandowski & Arcangelo, 1994). This research also suggests that any stigmatizing effects of the LD diagnosis tend to dissipate once the individual is able to operate more independently outside of the grade school setting.

Self-advocacy and empowerment of students with learning disabilities

There is a growing recognition that the skills necessary for long-term survival in postsecondary education and the workplace can only be fully developed when students with LD have a clear sense of their cognitive and academic strengths, weaknesses, and coping strategies (cf. Durlak, Rose & Bursuck, 1994; Roffman, Herzog & Wershba-Gerson, 1994; Ryan & Price, 1992; Stewart et al., 1994; Taves & Hutchinson, 1993). Without a thorough understanding of the nature and effect of their learning disability, students with LD will have difficulty effectively communicating their educational needs to others in a mature, independent manner. This concern has prompted considerable interest in the prospect of empowering students with LD to advocate on their own behalf.

Durlak et al. (1994) described a behavioral program designed to directly instruct high school students in skills necessary for a successful transition to postsecondary education. The goals of the program were to develop students' ability to describe their LD and its impact on school performance, identify appropriate instructional accommodations, and

arrange necessary accommodations with their teachers. The results suggested that these students could acquire, maintain, and generalize skills related to self-advocacy and disability self-awareness through direct instruction with two to five instructional trials per task.

Roffman et al. (1994) reported similar success with a 15-hour "Understanding Learning Disabilities" course for college students with LD. The course was designed to help these individuals develop a greater understanding and acceptance of their learning disabilities and how to educate others about their academic needs. Group meetings, classroom instruction, and individual programming based on prior documentation of the students' LD were employed to help the students identify ways to capitalize on their strengths to compensate for diagnosed weaknesses. The results suggested that the course expanded participants' knowledge regarding their LD, taught them to apply their self-understanding in a social context, and continued to positively influence their work performance up to one year following completion.

Taves and Hutchinson (1993) emphasized the role of the high school counsellor in facilitating successful transition from secondary to postsecondary education for students with LD in Canada. The program they described involved early identification, self-awareness and self-advocacy training, and realistic goal-setting assistance. A variety of interventions and supports were employed, including individual instruction, cooperative educational placement in the community, and an emphasis on practical planning based on identified needs and abilities. The results of the case study they presented indicated that their program helped the student develop the self-advocacy skills necessary to secure the required accommodations at the postsecondary level.

Results like these suggest that success at the postsecondary level for students with LD may be facilitated by the development of disability self-awareness and self-advocacy skills. Stated differently, students with LD appear more likely to succeed in postsecondary educational institutions when they are empowered as informed consumers and effective self-advocates (Stewart et al., 1994). Informed consumers know about their disability, acknowledge its existence and effects, and know what they need to accommodate it. Effective self-advocates ask for what they need, take appropriate advantage of opportunities for accommodations, and seek out others for added support and advocacy to promote systemic change.

Counsellors, educators, and other professionals can do much to facilitate the empowerment of students with LD. One of the most important steps involves early identification and programming for LD. Getzel (1990) advocates the development of transition planning teams as early as the seventh or eighth grade. As the student progresses through the educational system, the roles and responsibilities of the team members

shift, but major areas to be addressed include postsecondary admissions policies, registration procedures, financial assistance, academic support, and availability of other support services such as counselling and career planning (Getzel, 1990). Throughout such a process, the student should be periodically reassessed to determine his or her educational needs. The student should also be helped to understand and learn to explain his or her disability as it is manifest over time so that he or she will be in a position to identify and request the necessary accommodations at each stage of his or her education.

By directly acknowledging and openly addressing the existence of a learning disability throughout a student's schooling, counsellors and educators may help students with LD integrate information about their learning abilities and needs into their self-concept in a more adaptive fashion than if the disability is ignored or denied (cf. Lewandowski & Arcangelo, 1994). Frank discussions about the values and expectations of the postsecondary environment and workplace are also helpful to orient students with LD to the demands of these settings and the skills required to succeed there (cf. Durlak et al., 1994). Such preparation is particularly important in today's increasingly competitive job market where the ability to identify, understand, and capitalize on one's unique strengths is necessary for persons with LD to succeed (cf. Gerber, Ginsberg & Reiff, 1992; Reekie, 1993; White, 1992).

Students with LD may be further empowered by consistent institutional support for academic accommodations and personal counselling at all stages of their education. Access to justifiable program modifications to accommodate a student's documented information-processing weaknesses allows students with LD to function nearer their intellectual potential. Counsellors and other service providers can assist students in securing accommodations by arranging for diagnostic assessments when necessary and educating faculty members and administrators about the need for these services. Group and individual counselling may also prove helpful to students with LD as it helps to normalize their struggles within the educational system and offers an ongoing source of support. Self-help groups may be particularly beneficial because the process of organizing and developing such a group builds cohesion and a sense of commitment to the other members of their common cause. These groups may then serve as effective lobbying agents for improved LD services on campus (cf. LDAC, 1994).

Concluding comments

Empowerment has been described as "interventions and policies intended to enhance the degree of control vulnerable individuals exercise over their lives" (Prilleltensky, 1994, p. 358). We have outlined how such factors as early identification, academic accommodations, skills training,

and supportive counselling can empower students with LD by promoting the development of self-awareness and self-advocacy skills that may allow them to lead more independent and productive lives. We hope that this information will help those striving to empower students with LD at the postsecondary level and that it will stimulate counsellors, educators, and other professionals to work together at all educational levels to enhance opportunities for students with LD in this country.

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