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From Research to Effective Classroom Practice: Progress and Obstacles to Serving Students With Learning and Attention Issues

In June 2016, I had the honor of delivering the William Cruikshank Memorial Lecture at the annual meeting of the International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities (IARLD). What follows is the set of questions I asked myself as I prepared the presentation and a brief of the comments that unfolded in my talk.

1. *In 1972, William Cruikshank published a paper on the issues facing the field of learning disabilities (LD) at that time. How do the issues that Cruikshank raised in 1972 compare to the issues facing our field today?*

   Cruikshank wrote of three issues that were of particular concern to our field: (a) the challenge of accurately identifying LD; (b) the need to improve teacher knowledge of LD and our capacity to provide the professional support that teachers need to adequately serve children with LD; and (c) the challenges related to class action suits by families regarding access to programming.

   Clearly, we have made tremendous progress, but the issues that Cruikshank listed remain relevant today despite the nearly 45 years that have passed since then. The focus of my William M. Cruikshank Memorial Lecture was on how much progress we have made on these and other challenges facing our field.

2. *What progress have we made and in what areas?*

   Inarguably, much progress has been made since 1972 with respect to the status of individuals identified as having LD. One area in which we have seen progress is the public's perception of LD. According to a survey conducted by the Tremaine Foundation in 2010 (Gfk Custom Research North America, 2010), there has been a steady increase in the number of people who view individuals with LD as being just as intelligent as their nondisabled peers, with 81% of respondents reporting that they agree or mostly agree with this perception. Additionally, among respondents who are educators, 99% report that students with LD learn differently than their other students. These perceptions, while very general, suggest important development in the way people think about the impact of LD and likely their thoughts about how students with LD should be treated in school.

   In a related development, we have seen tremendous progress in the way people think about the long-term impact of LD. In the past, many perceived LD as a condition that would limit one's ability to succeed in life. However, according to the National Center on Education Statistics (National Longitudinal Transition Survey-2, 2011), the majority of parents today expect their children

with LD to graduate from high school and live independently. Indeed, the overwhelming majority expect their children with LD to get a paying job. At the same time, however, respondents are less certain that their children with LD will go on to receive a postsecondary education.

Perhaps one of the areas that have progressed most rapidly over the past decades is research on LD. One example is our expanded knowledge of how to identify specific types of LD. In 1972, when Cruickshank wrote, there was a singular focus on identifying individuals with LD using a severe discrepancy approach supported by assessment tools such as *The Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities* (ITPA; Kirk & McCarthy, 1961). Since then, due to methodological limitations, the ITPA, and more recently the severe discrepancy model, has been replaced by more contextualized identification practices. For example, in the area of reading for students with LD, researchers have noted that some students have a core phonological deficit that prevents them from hearing the individual sounds in words, which, in turn, can be a barrier to learning to blend sounds into words. This finding has resulted in a significant number of interventions focused on phonological awareness as a precursor to reading development (e.g., *RAVE-O,* Wolf, 2015; *Ladders to Literacy,* O'Connor, Notary Syverson, & Vadasy, 2005). Perhaps most important, identification of the core phonological deficit apart from other conditions (e.g., specific language delays, dyscalculia) has allowed for interventions to be differentiated, moving early reading interventions from a more macro focus on phonics to the more micro focus on phonological awareness paired with phonics.

However, much work needs to be done with regard to treatments specific to particular symptoms. For example, we continue to struggle with specific interventions tailored to meet the needs of students with attention issues. In the past, we treated attention as a behavior trait and sped up our instruction to hold attention. There is growing evidence, however, that this approach may exacerbate attention problems rather than ameliorate them. In short, in many cases, instructional options for addressing LD remain general and under-determined.

Another area of progress involves the establishment of standards for research-based practices within the special education research community (Gersten et al., 2005; Horner et al., 2005). Specifically, standards focus on the number of studies that have been conducted on a given intervention/practice, the types of methodologies employed in those studies, the number of researchers or research groups that have conducted research on the practice, and the outcomes from those studies.

Subsequently, these standards have been applied to particular practices used in special education classrooms, including repeated reading to improve reading fluency and self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) in writing (Baker, Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Apichatabutra, & Doabler, 2009; Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Baker, Doabler, & Apichatabutra, 2009). Such analyses have revealed gaps in the research literature and underscored the fact that many practices, even though widely implemented, have not been subject to rigorous, systematic study. For example, the research on SRSD in writing is much more systematic than research on repeated reading approaches. SRSD research comprises specific studies thoughtfully building on prior work, conducted by research teams from across the country with different populations of students.

Another advance that has impacted students with LD is a growing knowledge base on effective practices for teaching academic and noncognitive behaviors generated through research funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Research. Thus, the National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER) and the National Center for Education Research (NCER) have both developed guides listing practices supported by sufficient evidence to warrant their use in areas such as social behavior, literacy, and mathematics (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Publication#/ContentTypeId:3). Although not always studied specifically for use with students with LD, the practices have the potential to improve learning in the general education classroom.

Further, progress has been made in terms of helping teachers better identify students with LD who do not respond to and need additional support or intensive support through a response-to-intervention (RTI) framework with multiple tiers of instructional support (National Center on Response to Intervention; http://www.rti4success.org/essential-components-rti). This approach, codified in the 2004 reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,*

was meant to offer states the option to use the RTI framework rather than the severe discrepancy model used in most states. Today, RTI is the most common model for identifying and serving students with LD in public school settings.

The progress we have made as a field since 1972 is considerable. Our understanding of LD is much more sophisticated and the general public's perceptions about LD are much less limited. Additionally, we have made great strides in research on teaching and learning as well as in our understanding of the nature of education research. Many opportunities for improvement still exist, however.

3. *What obstacles and opportunities remain?*

Despite the progress illustrated above, a number of obstacles still remain in our work to improve teaching and learning for individuals with LD. One example is a persistent underfunding of education research in the United States. Since 2010, the Institute for Education Science, the research arm of the Department of Education, has not received a substantial budget increase for research. The NCSER, in particular, lost funding in 2011, and its research funding has not been restored to pre-2010 levels.

This unfortunate reality puts our hard-won knowledge about the needs of students with disabilities in general, and those with LD specifically, at risk of languishing. National advocacy groups (e.g., National Center for Learning Disabilities [NCLD]) continue to push for increased funding, but the U.S. Congress has been slow to react.

Further, although we have made strides in the public's perception of students with LD, much work remains to be done in this area. Again, according to a survey conducted by the Tremaine Foundation in 2010 (GfK Custom Research North America, 2010), 51% of adults believe that LD is a result of laziness and 55% believe that LD is caused by the home environment. The challenge is to continue to work as a community to highlight successes of individuals with LD across many domains and to work to educate the public on the causes and consequences of LD.

Another concern is that the professional LD community is diminishing. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) in its State of LD (2014) Report noted that between 2009 and 2013, membership organizations associated with professionals working with students with LD experienced a severe decline in membership decline. For example, the Division for Learning Disabilities of the Council for Exceptional Children has gone from more than 5,000 members in 2010 to fewer than 2,500 members today (M. Faggella-Luby, personal communication, November 7, 2016). Similarly, many organizations that support teachers and other personnel who work with students with LD have reported several years of flat revenue. These trends seem to suggest that professionals do not believe that they benefit from these organizations or feel they can get the same services elsewhere without the cost of membership or affiliation.

Finally, I believe there is reason for concern with regard to the number and quality of teachers being prepared to work in public education, specifically to work with students with LD. According to the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (http://specialedshortages.org), 49 states report a shortage of special education teachers; at the same time, the rate of special education teachers leaving the field is nearly double that of their general education counterparts. Moreover, these challenging figures are amplified as we look at communities of poverty where 90% of districts report difficulties in finding special education personnel. Despite national and regional efforts to solve these issues, the poor working conditions and relatively low salaries combined with challenges associated with receiving credentials (e.g., tuition costs, state tests) paint a bleak picture.

4. *Why does our work remain important 45 years after Cruikshank wrote his paper about the challenges facing our field?*

Many of the reasons that made Cruikshank's work relevant 45 years ago still apply today. Individuals with LD remain negatively impacted by their condition despite the many areas of progress noted above. For example, only 38% of students with LD are reading at grade level by fourth grade compared with 72% of their peers. Further, attendance by individuals with LD in postsecondary education is only half of that of their nondisabled peers and unemployment is nearly double that of their nondisabled peers. These negative consequences of LD remain persistent and continue to deserve our careful attention.

When we turn to specific subgroups, the statistics are even more startling. People living in poverty are nearly twice as likely to be identified as having LD as the general population, and black students are more likely to be identified for special education services than the population at large. Finally, students with attention difficulties are nearly seven times more likely than their nondisabled peers to be incarcerated. For example, according to the National Longitudinal Transition Survey-2 (NCES, 2011), 55% of young adults with LD report having some involvement with the criminal justice system within eight years of leaving high school.

Finally, though far less bleak than the consequences noted above, a number of new initiatives being recommended in our field may not be beneficial for students with LD. For example, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has invested substantially in the development of a Personalized Learning Initiative, designed to personalize students' learning experience based on their needs and interests (http://k12education.gatesfoundation.org/student-success/personalized-learning/). Many schools and school districts are embracing this idea and are working on models to implement it. However, while a personalized approach might offer enormous opportunities to meet the individual needs of students with LD, if it relies too much on self-guided learning or does not provide adequate instructional support, personalized learning may result in students languishing in content-area classes with little support from qualified teachers. Similarly, critics of education reform initiatives have suggested that many of these programs are not responsive to the needs of students with LD (e.g., Fabricant & Fine, 2012). In the case of pay-for-success programs, for example, some critics argue that teachers and schools are rewarded for keeping students out of special education despite their eligibility (McIntyre, 2015).

In closing, the future for students with LD is clearly brighter than it was in 1972, but we have much work to do to ensure that individuals with LD are able to achieve their dreams. To that end, I encourage each member of the Academy to reflect on how he or she can contribute to each of the following:

- Advocate for and conduct high-quality research;
- Expand advocacy efforts related to public perception about LD;
- Push for reform of teacher education that includes research on effective teaching and learning practices;
- Engage in efforts to recruit, support, and retain strong general and special education teachers who can make a difference in lives of individuals with LD;
- Work to re-energize our professional community by joining professional organizations that support any of the efforts on this list.

It was an honor to be selected to deliver the 2016 William Cruikshank Memorial Lecture at the annual meeting of the International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities. I hope this synopsis of my talk is helpful for those of you who were unable to join us in Austin.

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