



Should Reading-Disabled Adults Be Distinguished From Other Adults Seeking Literacy Instruction? A Review of Theory and Research

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KEY FINDINGS:

- There are fewer differences than traditionally assumed between adults with reading problems that are thought to stem from lack of educational opportunity or a weak aptitude for learning, and those adults with a reading disability.
- Weaknesses in reading among both groups are not confined to comprehension alone, but also frequently include more basic difficulties in recognizing words rapidly and accurately.
- If a person is a poor reader in adulthood, then it matters little whether the reading problem stemmed initially from a localized intrinsic limitation, a general learning problem, or inadequate educational opportunity.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Reading-disabled adults should *not* be distinguished from other poor readers unless it will (a) aid psychological well-being, (b) result in a call for differential instruction, or (c) gain access to special privileges or considerations that would be otherwise denied.
- The most effective approach to adult reading instruction is a skill-based one, tailored to the client's current levels of skill in word recognition, decoding automaticity, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Although both the adult learning disability community and adult literacy community deal with adults whose limited reading skills interfere with daily living, the pedagogical approaches of the two communities have differed markedly in terms of traditional assumptions, target population, and treatment. This report analyzes why the dichotomy between low literacy and reading disability may not be as useful as it once was and considers what is to be gained (or risked) by understanding low literacy from a reading disability perspective. Specifically addressed is how recent research on the causes, diagnoses, and treatment of reading disability in both children and adults may be applicable to detecting and working with low-literate adults who may or may not be reading disabled.

METHODOLOGY

This report is a literature review. The first two sections of the report show that the two independent fields have much to gain from each other. Next, a brief summary is given of the historical differences

between how low literacy and reading disability have been conceptualized, studied, and treated. The fourth section reconstructs recent shifts to emphasize what has occurred within both fields that results in the increasing overlap in ideas and practical goals. The next sections outline contemporary views of reading acquisition and reading disability in childhood and reflect the intense amount of activity in this area of research. A review of the research on reading disability in adulthood is given next, and finally, the implications of the reading disability findings for understanding and working with low-literate adults are discussed.

IMPLICATIONS

Research on adult outcomes of reading disability suggests that although the disability itself persists in adulthood, there is considerable variability in the severity of the ultimate deficit and its impact on overall functioning. Adult outcomes are not so much a function of the size of the IQ/achievement disparity, but rather of overall level of function, associated areas of dysfunction, instruction, socioeconomic factors, and positive coping style.

Across all studies, the most significant determinant of later success, however it is defined, is absolute level of performance in childhood; the less severe the problem, the better the prognosis, independent of IQ and socioeconomic status. However, the available research implies that the greatest emphasis in instruction will still have to be placed on identifying and improving the specific component skills deficits that prevent these adults with reading problems from becoming better readers. Most research progress has been made in understanding and treating these deficits, regardless of whether the poor reader is reading disabled or not.

FURTHER READING

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- Stedman, L. C., & Kaestle, C. F. (1987). Literacy and reading performance in the United States from 1880 to the present. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 22(1), 8-46.

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