

# INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

---

The world now facing the adult with learning disabilities is more complex and less predictable than ever before in history. Transition from adolescence to adult years brings a need to meet new people, interact in unique social situations, and assume responsibilities that before were completely controlled by others. Professionals working with adults demonstrating specific learning disabilities face many perplexing questions related to appropriate identification, intervention strategies, and service delivery models for this population. Before 1980, adults with learning disabilities were not even eligible for vocational rehabilitation services unless they had a physical or mental disability as defined by the *Federal Register* (November 29, 1979; Martin, 1987). Since 1980, the number of individuals identified as demonstrating a specific learning disability has risen disproportionately to other disabilities. The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR; 1992) reports that, in state rehabilitation programs, the percentages of clients demonstrating specific learning disabilities rose from 1.3% in 1983 to an estimated 5% in 1990.

Rehabilitation counselors are witnessing an ever-growing number of clients with documented learning disabilities being added to their case-loads. These same counselors are being provided very little psychological information for program planning. Chetkovick, Toms-Barker, and Schlichtmann (1989) reported that rehabilitation personnel are dissatisfied with the quality, time, and cost of assessment reports they receive through outside consultation. The instruments and vocational objectives often are not functional and/or ecologically sound. Because of this lack of effective assessment and intervention, many individuals with mild disabilities, such as those with specific learning disabilities, are falling short of their potential for achieving satisfactory levels of community adjustment. Professionals working with adults demonstrating learning disabilities do not have the empirical research to make valid and reliable policy and service delivery decisions. The current trend in serving adults with learning disabilities is to provide a bottom-up patchwork method of piecing together policy based on outdated service delivery models. Little consideration has been

given to a top-down approach to the problem, addressing the needs identified by the consumer rather than depending solely on the needs identified by service agencies that are often working in isolation. A revolution in service delivery for adults with learning disabilities must be the mandate of the future.

Current research on adults with learning disabilities, while vague and filled with methodological errors, identifies several priority areas. A primary area of concern is that of personal independence. Adults with learning disabilities, more than any other group of adults with disabilities, are much more likely to remain dependent on their parents (Fourqurean and LaCourt, 1991). In addition, individuals with learning disabilities have a higher dropout rate and are less likely to be employed or enrolled in school (Zigmond and Thornton, 1985). Most adults with learning disabilities are underemployed and face significant problems on the job because of their specific learning disabilities. Problems due to communication skills, oral language, and social skills have led to high rates of underemployment and lack of consistent work records for many adults with learning disabilities. In addition, a high rate of literacy problems (reading and writing) affect the job success of many adults with learning disabilities. Poor self-advocacy skills and difficulties that result from dropping out of school early lead to underutilization of adult services agencies, particularly state vocational rehabilitation agencies (Fourqurean and LaCourt, 1991). Affective competence in the areas of self-concept, self-understanding, and self-awareness has led to histories of long-term stress and anxiety for many of these adults (Gregg et al., 1992). Research has documented a concern over gender and ethnic bias in the identification and service delivery models currently used by professionals working with adolescents and adults (Fourqurean and LaCourt, 1991).

State rehabilitation agencies and local employment agencies are trying to implement reliable identification of adults demonstrating specific learning disabilities, as well as the development of appropriate interventions, modifications, and accommodations for such individuals. The articles in this issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabili-*

*tation* serve both to document the problems faced by adults with learning disabilities attempting to live and work independently and to identify policy and service delivery needs (assessment and intervention) that will lead to quality employment for such adults.

In the first article, Gregg reviews the current eligibility models used by professionals to determine learning disabilities. As she points out, the problem facing rehabilitation rests not so much on the definition of learning disabilities as on the eligibility criteria used to operationalize the definitions. Eligibility defines access to modifications and accommodations; therefore, it is the gatekeeper of services. Gregg states that because of the growing number of individuals who demonstrate specific learning disabilities seeking special services from rehabilitation, state, and Federal agencies, diagnostic models will need to be developed that determine whether an individual is eligible for learning disabilities services and provide information to counselors charged with developing the necessary interventions and accommodations for these individuals. Such a model, according to Gregg, will need to be robust enough to not only identify those individuals demonstrating specific learning disabilities but also the large number of dually diagnosed individuals for whom agencies must provide services (NIDRR, 1992).

Successful transition planning for adults demonstrating specific learning disabilities requires knowledge specific to the nuances of the local community, not just knowledge of national trends. Fourqurean describes the use of local follow-up studies for improving the effectiveness of transition planning, keeping in mind the various idiosyncrasies of local employment. The problems cited by Fourqurean's subjects, such as getting along with coworkers, handling pressures and punctuality, and a lack of awareness of rehabilitation services, have been identified in the literature as problems for adults with learning disabilities. In addition, he found significant gender and ethnic bias in the identification of and services provided to the adults in his study. Fourqurean encourages researchers to go beyond statistical analyses when studying the transitional needs of adults with learning disabilities to include qualita-

tive analyses (e.g., semantic relationships of common meanings) and to focus more on consumer input.

A recent emphasis in follow-up research with adults demonstrating learning disabilities has been to focus on "successful" adults in an attempt to identify positive qualities that have led to successful employment. Gerber, Reiff, and Ginsburg provide a qualitative investigation of 40 adults with learning disabilities identified as "successful" and use critical incident techniques (Flanagan, 1954, 1962) in an attempt to study the critical incidents in the lives of such adults that may have contributed to their success. The study was designed to evaluate the level of development in which the incidents occurred, the setting, and identification of positive as well as negative incidents. These authors found that over half of the critical incidents for these adults occurred in educational settings, and the occurrence of incidents in social settings in adulthood outweighed those in the elementary or secondary years. The adults in this study attached more significance to important events during adulthood relative to vocational success. The authors encourage the development of data-based programs that address and emphasize career awareness and transition.

Adults with learning disabilities often have unsuccessful employment records. Professionals attribute problems to poor communication and social skills. As Minskoff and DeMoss point out, however, what social skills are needed for what types of jobs has not been clearly identified in the literature. Therefore, they asked a group of employers and speech and language pathologists to rate a 64-item list as to essential, important, and not important work competencies. The findings of this study identified compliance, cooperation, problem solving, civility, and verbal communication as essential work competencies for success on the job. Results of this study have broad implications for transition programs and current rehabilitation counseling of adults demonstrating learning disabilities.

The affective problems of adults with learning disabilities is a recognized concern of many professionals working with this population. Recent follow-up studies have pointed to specific problems in

social/emotional areas that need further empirical research. But in her review of the literature, Hoy cautions that adults with learning disabilities have more options for changing their environment and stresses the need not to view such individuals simply as children who have grown up without changes. Hoy organizes the literature pertaining to the social/emotional characteristics of adults with learning disabilities around descriptive studies without a control group, studies with a control group, studies with success as a variable, and studies of adults in different settings. She encourages future researchers to apply a lifespan developmental approach to the social/emotional needs of adults with learning disabilities, be sensitive to gender bias, and match cognitive processing style to personality profiles.

The article by McPherson and Brackett summarizes the postsecondary transition issues affecting the vocational rehabilitation of adults with learning disabilities. They first explore the employment issues affecting these adults. As they state, "laws may change behavior but not belief systems." The problems discussed by Minskoff and DeMoss and Fourqurean pertaining to the concerns of employers in hiring adults with learning disabilities is again reinforced in this article. McPherson and Brackett also provide a thorough critique of postsecondary programs available for adults with learning disabilities. They identify supported employment programs as one of the most successful ways to serve the population of adults with learning disabilities leaving high

school and attempting to enter the job market. A strong appeal is made in this article for greater collaboration among vocational rehabilitation, special education, regular education, and other service providers for the purposes of both research and service pertaining to the needs of adults with learning disabilities.

All of the articles in this issue certainly provide evidence that adults with learning disabilities continue to demonstrate difficulties with academic and social skills, which often affect their employability, job performance, and success in college or other academic pursuits. There is a tremendous need for greater empirical research documenting 1) social, academic, and vocational profiles of such adults, including strengths as well as weaknesses; 2) eligibility and diagnostic models that are effective and robust in identifying the broad range of abilities indicative of this population; (3) interventions effective in addressing the social, academic, and vocational needs of adults with learning disabilities; 4) service delivery models that will provide greater collaboration among professionals working with this population; 5) transition rehabilitation programs most effective with different types of learning disabilities; and 6) national policy for the identification and provision of service to adults with learning disabilities. The following articles will provide professionals with a strong foundation in the future research and service needs of adults with learning disabilities.

Noel Gregg, PhD

## REFERENCES

- Chetkovich, C., Toms-Barker, L., and Schlichtmann, L. (1989). *Evaluation of services provided for individuals with specific learning disabilities. Final Report*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Rehabilitation Services Administration, Contract No. 300-87-0112.
- Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychol Bull*, 51, 327-358.
- Flanagan, J. C. (1962). *Measuring human performance*. Pittsburgh, PA: American Institute for Research.
- Fourqurean, J. M., and LaCourt, T. (1990). A follow-up of former special education students: A model for program evaluation. *Remed Spec Educ*, 12, 16-23.
- Gregg, N., Hoy, C., King, M., Moreland, C., and Jagota, M. (1992). The MMPI-2 profile of adults with learning disabilities in university and rehabilitation settings. *J Learn Disab*, 25, 386-395.
- Martin, E. (1987). Developing public policy concerning "regular" or "special" education for children with learning disabilities. *Learn Disabil Focus*, 3, 11-16.
- National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR). (1992). Certain rehabilitation research and training centers proposed funding priorities for fiscal years 1993-1994. *Fed Reg*, 57, 43111.
- Zigmond, N., and Thornton, H. (1985). Follow-up of postsecondary age learning disabled graduates and dropouts. *Learn Disabil Res*, 1, 50-55.