

Terminological Confusion in Learning Disorders

“Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth”: Genesis 11: 7, 8

Specific learning disorders (SLD or LD) as per Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5th edition (DSM-5) is characterized by persistent and impairing difficulties in academic skills. These are diagnosed after ruling out other underlying causes for scholastic backwardness.

There is terminological confusion in this area due to the use of two terms – ‘learning disorder’ and ‘learning disability’. Nelson’s Textbook of Pediatrics, 20th edition and many textbooks of Psychiatry use the same nomenclature and sub classification as in DSM-5.

Consensus Statement of Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP) uses the term learning disability, and states its equivalence to SLD [1]. In the United Kingdom, learning disability is the term used to denote mental retardation (intellectual developmental disability) in ICD-11 and DSM-5 [1]. Few other Indian authors also use the term learning disability instead of SLD [2,3]. LD probably affects around 5-10% of school-going children [1]. But difference in case definition has led to variation in reported rates in India [4,5].

To complicate the situation further, the newly enacted Revised Persons with Disability (RPWD) Act also uses the term ‘Learning disability’ for ‘Learning disorder’ but interventions and disability provisions for two conditions are different.

Due to this confusion, we suggest that medical personnel from all specialties stick to a single term ‘Specific Learning disorder’. The term Specific Learning Disability is best abandoned as its meaning differs in different contexts. Otherwise, we may end up in a confused scenario where we “will not understand one another’s speech.”

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EXPERT’S REPLY

We appreciate the authors’ effort for highlighting the terminological confusion in Learning Disorders. We have following observations:

1. To summarize the terminology ‘landscape’, the main agencies using the term ‘Specific Learning Disorder’ include: DSM-5, ICD-11, and Nelson’s Textbook of Pediatrics; and the agencies that use the term ‘Learning Disability (LD)’ include: American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Revised Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 2016. Thus, both the names are being extensively used by crucial decision-making agencies. Supporting either of the names at this juncture may not be appropriate.
2. It should be noted that LD involves certification processes and the decision on terminology, thus requires a consensus. If any alternate name is formalized without a consensus, it could create more confusion. The decision needs to be taken by organizations in consultation with relevant Government authorities.
3. The term ‘Learning Disorder’ is used interchangeably with ‘Learning Difficulty’ in spite of the technical demarcation. However, a ‘Learning Disability’ must meet the DSM-5 criteria and the diagnosis is based on a combination of the student’s educational history, a