Specific Learning Disabilities: Using Patterns of Strengths and Weaknesses to Plan Instruction

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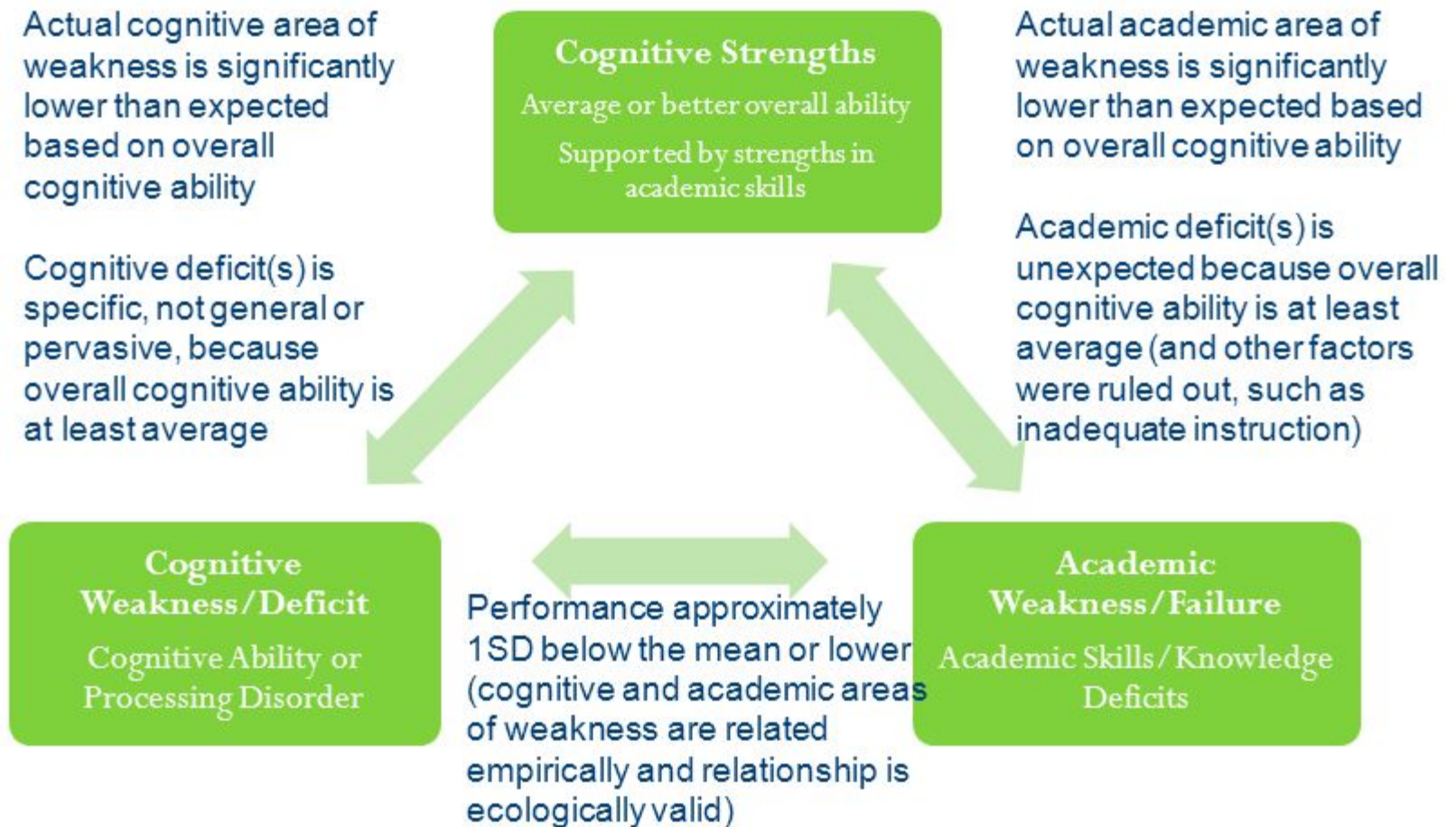Dr. Edward Schultz
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Specific Learning Disability Definition

- *Specific learning disability* means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of intellectual disability, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

What Specific Learning Disability is <u>NOT</u>

SLD is	SLD is Not
characterized by an otherwise normal Cognitive Ability Profile , indicating that the student has areas of strengths at or above the average range along with a specific area or areas of processing weakness.	characterized by generally low or below average cognitive abilities with little or no areas of strength.
characterized as a "within learner" trait.	explained by external factors such as instructional or environmental variables.
an educational disability.	solely a medical or mental health diagnosis.
sometimes in existence with other disability conditions (sensory, language, behavioral) .	primarily explained by another disability and/or condition (Emotional Disturbance, Intellectual Disability, etc.).

What is a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses?

Actual cognitive area of weakness is significantly lower than expected based on overall cognitive ability

Cognitive deficit(s) is specific, not general or pervasive, because overall cognitive ability is at least average

Cognitive Strengths

Average or better overall ability

Supported by strengths in academic skills

Actual academic area of weakness is significantly lower than expected based on overall cognitive ability

Academic deficit(s) is unexpected because overall cognitive ability is at least average (and other factors were ruled out, such as inadequate instruction)

Cognitive Weakness/Deficit

Cognitive Ability or Processing Disorder

Performance approximately 1 SD below the mean or lower (cognitive and academic areas of weakness are related empirically and relationship is ecologically valid)

Academic Weakness/Failure

Academic Skills/Knowledge Deficits

Sotelo, Flanagan, and Alfonso (2011). Overview of SLD Identification. In D. P. Flanagan & V. C. Alfonso, *Essentials of Specific Learning Disability Identification.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; Flanagan, Fiorello, and Ortiz (2010); Hale, Flanagan, and Naglieri (2008)

Research to Support PSW

- Due to its strong emphasis on research based principles, it has been suggested this model may provide more legally defensible information in litigious cases (Feifer & Della Toffalo, 2007).

- Additionally, since a PSW assessment answers the question of why a student is struggling academically, educators can more accurately target interventions to meet a learner's specific needs, regardless of whether the student meets eligibility requirements for Special Education (Mascolo, Alfonso & Flanagan, 2014).

- The PSW Model answers the essential question of why the student is not responding. It also serves to better assist teams in ruling out additional causes for underachievement, including exclusionary factors and cognitive characteristics that do not
support the conceptualization of SLD (e.g. all weaknesses and no strengths). This model may further assist teams in explaining what areas can be remediated and what areas require accommodations (Hanson et al., 2009).

Differences in Evaluation

- the student's general education teacher must serve on the team to document the student's academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty and to provide documentation for any previous interventions. If the student does not have a general education teacher, a general education classroom teacher qualified to teach a student-of his or her age must serve on the team;

- the LEA must ensure that the student is observed in the learning environment which includes the regular classroom setting to document the student's academic performance and behavior in the areas of difficulty. The team may:

    a. use information from an observation in routine classroom instruction and monitoring of the student's performance that was done before the student was referred for evaluation; or

    b. conduct an observation of the student's academic performance in a regular classroom after the parental consent has been obtained;

    c. in the case of a student out of school, a team member shall observe the child in an environment appropriate for a child of that age;

- the evaluation team shall review and analyze the student's response(s) to scientifically research-based intervention(s) documented by progress monitoring data;

- based on the review and analysis in Subparagraph 3 above and the reason(s) for referral, a formal educational assessment shall be conducted by an educational diagnostician or other qualified personnel with training in formal educational assessment. This assessment shall document the pattern of strengths and areas of low achievement;

- a psychological assessment shall be conducted by a certified school psychologist, when necessary, to rule out an intellectual disability;

Differences in Evaluation

- a speech/language assessment shall be conducted by a speech/language pathologist when oral expression or listening comprehension is suspected to be an area of impairment. The results of the speech/language assessment may and should be used when considering strengths and areas of low achievement for this exceptionality;

- when neurological or other health/medical problems are suspected, an assessment shall be conducted by a physician, neurologist, or neuropsychologist.

So, How do I plan?

- Do you have cognitive testing?

- If not, what do you have?
    - Academic Strengths and weaknesses
- Using that for planning instruction

EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Source of Data: *Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement II (KTEA II)*
A standard score between 85 and 115 are considered to be in the average range.

Subject Matter / Skill Area	Grade Equivalency	Age Equivalency	Standard Score	Standard Deviation	Percentile Rank
Letter & Word Recognition	1.8	7:3	73	-1.8	4
Reading Comprehension	1.8	7:3	70	-2.0	2
Total Reading			**70**	**-2.0**	2
Math Concepts & Applications	1.7	7:0	66	-2.3	1
Math Computation	1.4	7:0	59	-2.7	0.3
Total Mathematics			**59**	**-2.7**	**0.3**
Written Expression	1.6	7:0	70	-2.0	2
Spelling	1.8	7:3	73	-1.8	4
Written Language Composite			**71**	**-1.9**	**3**

EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT

Source of Data: *Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement II (KTEA II)*
A standard score between 85 and 115 are considered to be in the average range.

Subject Matter / Skill Area	Grade Equivalency	Age Equivalency	Standard Score	Standard Deviation	Percentile Rank
Letter & Word Recognition	K.10	6:3	73	-1.8	4
Reading Comprehension	1.0	6:0	70	-2.0	2
Total Reading			**70**	**-2.0**	**2**
Math Concepts & Applications	1.2	6:6	76	-1.6	6
Math Computation	1.10	7:3	84	-1.1	5
Total Mathematics			**77**	**-1.5**	**14**
Written Expression	1.5	7:0	78	-1.5	7
Spelling	<1.0	<6:0	69	-2.1	2
Written Language Composite			**73**	**-1.8**	**4**

EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The <u>Wechsler Individual Achievement Test</u> (WIAT-III) was administered to Alaya. She was cooperative and seemed to put forth her best effort. The following results were obtained.

	Grade Equivalency	Age Equivalency	Standard Score	Standard Deviation	Percentile
SUBTESTS/ COMPOSITES					
READING					
Early Reading Skills	K.3	5:4	89	-.7	23
Word Reading	<1.0	6:0	99	-.1	47
Pseudoword Decoding					
Reading Comprehension	<1.0	<6:0	86	-.9	18
Oral Reading Fluency	<1.0	<6:0	91	-.6	27
Total Reading					
Math Problem Solving	K.2	5:4	83	-1.1	13
Numerical Operations	1.0	6:0	101	+.1	53
Math Composite			**91**	**-.6**	**27**
MATH FLUENCY					
Math Fluency - Addition	<1.0	<6:0	90	-.7	25
Math Fluency - Subtraction	<1.0	<6:0	92	-.5	30
Math Fluency Composite			**91**	**-.6**	**27**
Alphabet Writing Fluency	K.2	5:0	90	-.7	25
Spelling	2.1	7:4	127	+1.8	96
Sentence Composition	<1.0	<6:0	88	-.8	21
Written Expression Composite			**101**	**+.1**	**53**
ORAL LANGUAGE					
Listening Comprehension	PK.3	4:4	78	-1.5	7
Oral Expression	K.2	5:3	87	-.9	19
Oral Language Composite			**80**	**-1.3**	**9**

Questions/Comments

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