

Intellectual Disability vs Learning Disability

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Abstract

Terms like special child and disability are commonly used now. People understand that something is lacking with the child when such terms are used. But this awareness is incomplete and has brought in lot of confusion. This paper aims to bring out such misconceptions and its implication while also clarifying the terms 'Intellectual disability' and 'Learning disability'. A clear distinction of these two terms can be arrived with the help of the IQ levels of each category. Intellectual disability is characterized by a below average IQ level ($IQ < 70$) while learning disability is characterized by an above average IQ level ($IQ > 85$). The expected levels of academic achievement correlate with the IQ level.

Keywords: Intellectual disability (ID), Learning disability (LD), Slow learner, IQ

Introduction

There was a time when disability was imagined as something visible, like a locomotor disability, visual or hearing impairment. But now there is an increasing awareness about disabilities at the cognitive level which are not visible when we look at the person but has a huge impact on the his / her life. This hidden nature of the disabilities at the cognitive level makes it tough to be identified and understood by a common person.

The four key terms intellectual disability, mental retardation, slow learner and learning disability are explained as follows.

Intellectual Disability

Intellectual disability (formerly known as mental retardation) is seen as a disorder with onset during the developmental period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual, social and practical domains (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In DSM-4, this disorder was called 'Mental Retardation' to reflect the below-average intellectual ability of individuals with this condition. However, the developers of DSM-5 agreed to abandon this term because of its negative connotation.

Learning Disability

Learning disability is an umbrella term that covers a range of disorders in learning. It manifests as difficulties in acquiring skills such as reading, spelling, writing, comprehension etc. during conventional classroom instruction. It is currently attributed to differences in brain structure and wiring. Based on the difficulties seen, it is further termed as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia. It cannot be explained by low intellectual ability or a sensory impairment.

Slow Learner

This category fall above the IQ range of intellectual disability but below the average level and can be ca-

lled as borderline functioning in clinical terms. (Torres 2017) They most often have learning problems at school and are labelled as slow learners. They lag behind in developmental readiness to grasp the concepts that are within easy reach of the majority of their age mates. So, they may be called rather slow developers than slow learners. (Chauhan, S. 2011) As an adult, a slow learner usually becomes self-supporting, independent and socially adjusted. These slow learners are markedly different from under achievers and learning disabled. (Kirk 1962)

Common Misconceptions and its Implications

An informal, one to one discussion was carried out with 30 individuals who are well- educated, professionals from varied sectors and parents of school- going children. This group was chosen carefully so as to get a representation of the society's misconception even among the well- educated and well-informed category of people. The most common misconceptions and its implications are as follows:

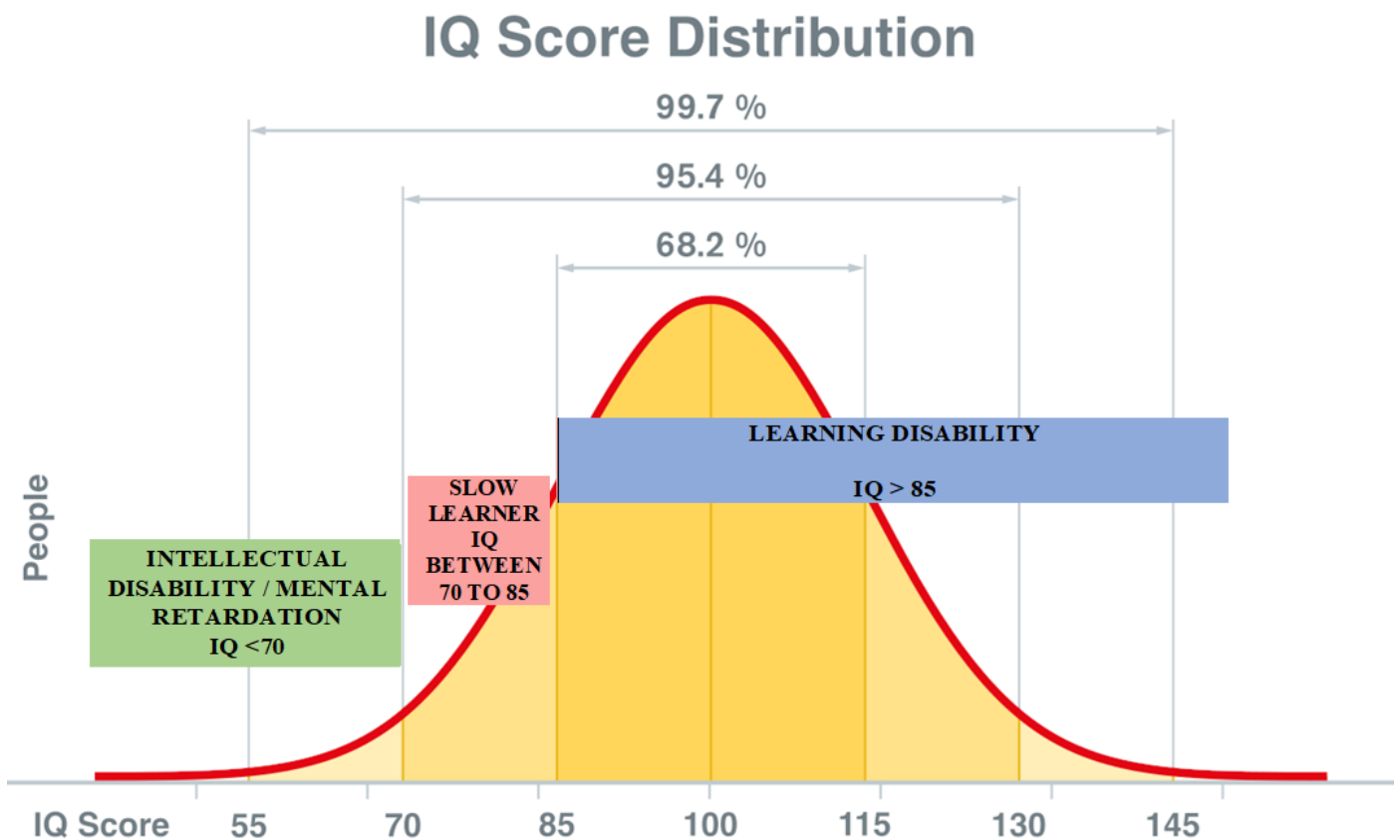
- The name change from 'Mental retardation' to 'Intellectual disability' has reduced the stigma and negative impact it had on the intellectually disabled children. But, the similarity of this word to 'Learning disability' causes a confusion. It is sometimes used synonymously not just in speech, but also in the printed form in various media.
- The above name change has also led to a thought that both the terms imply a different condition. Intellectual disabled are perceived to be better in cognitive and other skills than the mentally retarded children, whereas in reality both imply the same.
- Yet another casual term used by schools and even parents is 'Slow learner' referring to a child who scores low marks and generally weak in academic skills, whereas the technical meaning of the word is different. Low marks may be due to many reasons other than borderline IQ like lack of effective instruction or poor study skills.
- The above points show that a child may get labelled wrongly or the condition may be misunderstood by people around the child.
- The achievement levels associated with each of these terms are also misunderstood. While an intellectually disabled child cannot go far with academics and limited to primary schooling, adaptive skills and daily skills; a learning-disabled child with his above average IQ and right intervention can definitely proceed to graduation and job. But the wrong idea that a learning- disabled cannot grow academically would make the parent stop the child's education at a much lower level of education than the child's actual capacity.
- Though all the above conditions are lifelong and manageable with intervention and remediation, some tend to believe it as curable. This may lead them to wrong practices in hope of curing the condition.
- Conditions like learning disability are completely hidden and the learning-disabled child will look as normal and smart as a neurotypical child and will fit in regular schools. But, parents under the wrong belief that learning disability is visible may protest to an LD child studying along with their neurotypical child. This is the harsh reality even while the education system comes up with various accommodations to make regular schools inclusive for a special child.
- Some special educators and psychiatrists seem to believe that intellectual disability and learning disability can co-exist. There are cases of diagnosing ID and LD for the same child in a formal assessment report. As per the Practice Guidelines for the Assessment and Intervention of Specific Learning Disabilities (Revised 2020), the IQ level should be more than 85 for even a child to get tested

for learning disability. IQ level of intellectual disability is less than 70. This clearly shows that both cannot co-exist.

The most important aspect of learning disability is that the child shows difficulties in some aspects like reading or writing in spite of above average intelligence. But the difficulties of an intellectually disabled or slow learner can be attributed to low IQ thereby ruling out even the need to get tested for learning disability. Lack of this clarity among professionals is shocking and will unnecessarily lead to a child getting over-labelled.

Intellectual disability vs Learning disability

A clear distinction of intellectual disability and learning disability can be arrived with the help of the IQ levels of each category. This point of distinction is to be highlighted the most as it helps even a common man to understand about each of the conditions. The expected levels of academic achievement correlate with the IQ level.



As evident from the above graph, the IQ range of each category is unique and does not overlap. The academic achievements are in line with the IQ levels. Only the mild categories of intellectual disability are educable to the level of primary schooling, while the moderate categories are trainable and profound category needs full care and support. The slow learners with a below average IQ, but not low enough to be classified as intellectual disability, can go up to schooling and even simple graduate courses depending on various other factors like remediation and support provided. The category with learning disability has an average or above average IQ and can achieve anything that a neurotypical person would achieve or even more when provided with the right interventions and choices.

Conclusion

Though the term special child and special education are common for many categories, it is important to gain clarity about each condition. This will help in identifying the special children, their needs and capabilities in a right way without any mislabeling so as to provide the right support and opportunities in the long term.

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