



A Brief History of Learning Disabilities

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On April 10, my colleague, **Dr. Surina Basho**, and I gave a presentation entitled “Morrissey-Compton Educational Center Looks Back at 33 Years of Key Shifts in Student Needs and Intervention” at a Silicon Valley Education Network Meeting. The presentation included a brief introduction regarding our executive function research initiative.

In preparing for this meeting, we had the welcomed opportunity to reflect upon our agency’s work. In doing so, we noticed that Morrissey-Compton’s history of assessment and academic intervention has closely mirrored a sizeable slice of the evolution, deeper understanding, and greater appreciation of learning disabilities.



In the Beginning...

There is no doubt that individuals have always been keenly aware of when they could or could not pick up a concept as well as their peers. When, though, did our society start to think about how to conceptualize these learning challenges?

We do know that in 1877, the term “word blindness” was developed to describe a sort of text blindness even though the individual had intact intelligence and speech. Look ahead ten years, and the term “dyslexia” was coined to capture broader difficulty interpreting written words.

Fast Forward One Century

It was not until 1963 that the term “learning disability” was born. Thankfully, after this time, legislation centered on supporting students with learning disabilities began to surface.

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) mandated a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) for all students. In other words, eligible students could receive special education services. These services were to be individualized, hence the term Individual Education Plan, or IEP.

FAPE is still a pillar for our students, and those of us who attend IEP meetings as a clinician, parent, or advocate often cite FAPE when making an argument as to why a student requires certain special education services.

Evolution of an IDEA –and an Agency

In 1990, PL 94-142 was renamed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and autism and traumatic brain injury were added as eligibility areas in which a student could qualify for special education support. IDEA continues today, though it was reauthorized in both 1997 and 2004.

Morrissey-Compton shifted its assessment offerings to coincide with changes in IDEA. For example, when Other Health Impairment (OHI) was added as an eligibility category with the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, Morrissey-Compton added more staff psychologists who could make formal diagnoses such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). To this day, some, but not all, students with ADHD may qualify for special education services through the OHI category.

Apart from special education, Morrissey-Compton has ensured that our assessments and academic intervention offerings are in line with the latest research. For instance, as research solidified the robust connection between phonological awareness and reading, Morrissey-Compton required the tools to assess phonological awareness such as the Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing, now in its second edition. Similarly, we continue to expand our academic intervention offerings to include not only individualized, strategy-based tutoring but also more formal educational therapy with the use of various evidenced-based intervention methods such as Slingerland and Orton-Gillingham. Both programs are designed to bolster reading and spelling skills in students with dyslexia.

Still a Work in Progress

Beyond acknowledging the development of better assessment and intervention in either a clinic or school setting, it is important to highlight noteworthy advancements in the understanding of learning disabilities from neurological and genetic perspectives. In the late 1990s, the National Institute of Health used functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to pinpoint regions of the brain that work differently in struggling readers. The early 2000s brought us a new appreciation of the link between genes and learning disabilities, particularly dyslexia. Specifically, researchers and scientists have found that variations in a particular gene pose a greater risk for dyslexia.

As a community of students, parents, educators, psychologists, researchers, and scientists, we have come a long way in understanding and addressing learning disabilities. There is a long way to go, however, to continue to improve the lives of students with learning disabilities, and Morrissey-Compton is proud to be part of this evolution.

To learn more about the history of learning disabilities, see the following resources used to help write this article:

- US Department of Education: “The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Celebrates 35 Years of IDEA,” www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/idea35/index.html.
- LDOnline: “Timeline of Learning Disabilities,” <http://www.ldonline.org/article/11244/>.
- YaleNews: “Yale Researchers Unravel Genetics of Dyslexia and Language Impairment,” <http://news.yale.edu/2013/06/12/yale-researchers-unravel-genetics-dyslexia-and-language-impairment>.