Learning Disability or Learning Differences: Understanding Differences Between Cultural and Linguistic Diversity, Learning Differences, and Learning Disabilities

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Abstract : Students demonstrate various learning preferences and learning styles that range from visual, auditory to kinesthetic preferences. These learning preferences are further impacted by individual cognitive make up that characterizes itself in linguistic strengths, logical- special, inter-or intra- personal, just to name a few. Students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CLD) have an increased risk of being misunderstood by many school systems and even medical personnel. CLD students are influenced by many factors (like acculturation and experience) that may impact their achievements and functioning levels. CLD students who develop initial or basic interpersonal communication proficiency skills in the target language are even at a higher risk for being suspected of learning disability when they are underachieving academically. Research indicates that large numbers of students arenot provided the type of education and types of supports they need in order to be successful in an academicenvironment. Multiple research findings indicate that significant numbers of school staff self-reports that they do not feel adequately prepared to work with CLD students. It is extremely important for the school staff, especially school psychologists, who often are the first experts that are consulted, to be educated about overlapping symptoms and settle differences between learning difference and disability. It is equally important for medical personnel, mainly pediatricians, psychologists, and psychiatrists, to understand the subtle differences to avoid inaccurate opinions. Having the knowledge, school staff can avoid unnecessary referrals for special education evaluations and avoid inaccurate decisions about the presence of a disability. This presentation will illustrate distinctions based on research between learning differences and disabilities, how to recognize them, and how to assess for them.
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