

**DEMYSTIFYING THE DEFINITIONS:  
Differentiating the Definitions of Learning Disability the diagnosis, the  
Exceptionality, and the ISA Profile in Ontario**

Dr. A. Lynne Beal, Psychologist  
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**What does it mean for someone to have a “learning disability”?**

The answer is it depends. It depends on how that term was used to describe the individual, and the purpose for which the individual was described to have a learning disability.

These pages describe three uses of the term Learning Disability: as a psychological diagnosis; as an Exceptionality Category under the Education Act; and as an ISA Funding Profile under the Education Act. Each of these has a different definition and a different purpose, and has different implications for the individual.

**Isn't a Learning Disability always a Diagnosis?**

“Learning Disability” is not a protected term in Ontario jurisprudence. Thus, any group may use the term to describe an individual. Usually the term is accompanied by a definition and a set of established criteria. In Ontario, a learning disability may be:

- a psychological diagnosis under the Psychology Act of a neuropsychological disorder for the purpose of differential diagnosis and appropriate treatment; or
- an Exceptionality Category under the Education Act for the purpose of determining eligibility for Special Education programming; or
- a Profile under the Ministry of Education’s Student Focused Funding formula for the purpose of determining students who will generate the Intensive Support Amount (ISA) of funding.

Put simply, there is a difference between a diagnosis of learning disability and criteria for individuals to meet programming eligibility, such as for special education in the schools, or for ISA funding under the Student-Focused Funding Model in Ontario.

**Learning Disability: The Diagnosis of a Neuropsychological Disorder**

In Ontario, diagnosis is a Controlled Act under Section 27(1) of the Regulated Health Professions Act. It is defined as:

"Communicating to the individual or his or her personal representative a diagnosis identifying a disease or disorder as the cause of symptoms of the individual in circumstances in which it is reasonably foreseeable that the individual or his or her personal representative will rely on the diagnosis."

Members of the College of Psychologists (Psychologists and Psychological Associates) and members of the College of Physicians and Surgeons (usually developmental pediatricians) are authorized to diagnose learning disabilities.

The College of Psychologists of Ontario describes diagnosis in *The Bulletin*, Volume 24 No. 2, page 5 in the following way:

“The formulation of a diagnosis is usually made in the course of a psychological assessment that takes the observations of an individual’s strengths and weaknesses further to identify and integrate causes, antecedents and determinants in such a way as to provide psychological interpretation consistent with the accepted nomenclature and associated body of knowledge and research.

The finding of a learning disability is a psychological diagnosis when this term is used to identify the cause of a set of symptoms exhibited by an individual.”

### **How are Learning Disabilities Diagnosed?**

Since 1962 when the term “learning disabilities” came into use, there has been no single universally accepted definition of the condition. In 2001 the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario published a new definition of Learning Disabilities, devised to be scientifically sound, based on and supported by current research findings, and inclusive of the varying types of learning disabilities. Practitioners can diagnose a learning disability based on the new LDAO definition of learning disabilities.

The definition is presented below in a table that compares it to the Exceptionality Category, Learning Disability.

### **What is the Exceptionality “Learning Disability”?**

The Education Act R.S.O. 1990 defines an Exceptional pupil as:

“a pupil whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education programme by a committee of the board”.


The Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) identifies Exceptional students according to the Ministry’s Exceptionality Categories and Definitions. “Learning Disability” is an Exceptionality definition within the category, “Communication”. The purpose of the identification is to provide special education programming to the student.

The definition is presented below in a table that compares it to the LDAO definition of learning disability.

### **How is the Diagnosis of Learning Disability different from the Ministry of Education's Exceptionality Category of Learning Disability?**

The difference between the diagnosis and the Exceptionality of Learning Disability is demonstrated using the LDAO definition of learning disability to define the diagnosis. It provides a clear definition for the diagnosis that many practitioners in Ontario use.

The following table presents the LDAO definition of learning disability on the left side, and the Ministry of Education's definition of learning disability the Exceptionality on the right side. While this format changes the order of parts of these definitions as they are written, this format shows where the two definitions differ.

 <p><b>LEARNING DISABILITIES ASSOCIATION OF ONTARIO</b></p>	
<b>Diagnosis</b>	<b>Exceptionality</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, organization or use of verbal and/or nonverbal information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- evident in both academic and social situations</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- result from impairments in 1 or more psychological processes related to learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- involves 1 or more of the processes necessary for the proper use of spoken language or the symbols of communication</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- average abilities for thinking and reasoning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- no reference to average ability</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- specific not global impairments, distinct from intellectual disabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- is not primarily the result of developmental disability</li> </ul>
<p>Impaired psychological processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- phonological processing</li> <li>- memory and attention</li> <li>- processing speed</li> <li>- language processing</li> <li>- perceptual-motor processing</li> <li>- visual-spatial processing</li> </ul>	<p>deficits in one or more of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-</li> <li>-</li> <li>- receptive language, language processing (thinking, conceptualizing, integrating)</li> </ul>

- executive functioning	
Interfere with the acquisition and use of one of: - Reading - Written language - Oral language - Mathematics	Results in a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability with deficits in one or more of: - receptive language (listening, reading) - expressive language (talking, spelling, writing) - mathematics computations
Due to genetic, other congenital and/or acquired neuro-biological factors  Rule out cultural or language differences, SES or lack of motivation	May be associated with a condition diagnosed as: - A perceptual handicap - A brain injury - Minimal brain dysfunction - Dyslexia - Developmental aphasia
- Some impairments may be noted during the pre-school years, while others may not become evident until much later  - During the school years, LDs are suggested by unexpectedly low academic achievement or achievement that is sustainable only by extremely high levels of effort and support	- A learning disorder evident in both academic and social situations  - Results in a significant discrepancy between academic achievement and assessed intellectual ability

### **Eligibility for ISA Level 2 or 3 funding under Profile 3.2 or 3.3, Learning Disability:**

The Ministry of Education's special education funding formula for elementary and secondary education states that "Claims that meet this profile represent a student who is diagnosed with a learning disability and who demonstrates significant difficulty with academic achievement and behaviours that affect learning."


This profile then, begins with the **diagnosis of a learning disability** by a member of the College of Psychologists or the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. In addition to the diagnosis, the Ministry applies a severity test to demonstrate that the student has significant difficulty with academic achievement. The severity test requires:

- The highest obtained IQ or Composite score falls within the Average range (25<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher); and

- A score on one or more measures of psychological processing logically related to the academic difficulty ... falls at least 1.5 standard deviations below the IQ or Composite score reported above\*; and
- One or more scores on a standardized test of skills related to academic achievement (oral language, reading, written language, mathematics) is at least 2 standard deviations below the IQ or Composite score reported above

\*see table for a list of the psychological processes

**Some differences between ISA Profile 3, Learning Disability and the definition of Learning Disability as a Diagnosis include:**

	
<p><b>DIAGNOSIS LEARNING DISABILITY</b></p>	<p><b>ISA PROFILE 3 LEARNING DISABILITY</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- average skills essential for thinking and reasoning</li> <li>- no specific definition of “average”</li> <li>- specific not global impairments, distinct from intellectual disabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- IQ or Composite score on a standardized test falls within the Average range (25<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher)</li> <li>- Composite score is defined as “On a test of intellectual ability, the aggregate score produced from various subtest scores</li> </ul>
<p>Impaired psychological processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- phonological processing</li> <li>- memory and attention</li> <li>- processing speed</li> <li>- language processing</li> <li>- perceptual-motor processing</li> <li>- visual-spatial processing</li> <li>- executive functioning</li> </ul>	<p>One or more measure of psychological processing;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- phonological processing</li> <li>- memory</li> <li>- attention</li> <li>- processing speed</li> <li>- language processing</li> <li>- perceptual-motor processing</li> <li>- visuo-spatial processing</li> <li>- executive functioning</li> </ul>
<p>No size of discrepancy between thinking ability and impairment in psychological process(es) related to learning</p>	<p>One or more measure of psychological processing falls at least 1.5 standard deviations below the IQ or Composite score reported</p>

<p>Interferes with the acquisition and use of one of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Oral language</li> <li>- Reading</li> <li>- Written language</li> <li>- Mathematics</li> </ul>	<p>Impact on skill related to academic achievement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- oral language</li> <li>- reading</li> <li>- written language</li> <li>- mathematics</li> </ul>
<p>Learning disabilities range in severity and invariably interfere with the acquisition and use of one or more important (academic) skills.</p>	<p>One or more scores on a standardized test of skills related to academic achievement is at least 2 standard deviations below the IQ or Composite score reported above</p>
<p>Result from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning. See list of processes above. No size of the impact is specified.</p>	<p>One or more measure of psychological processing falls at least 1.5 standard deviations below the IQ or Composite score reported</p>
<p>Interferes with the acquisition and use of one of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Oral language</li> <li>- Reading</li> <li>- Written language</li> <li>- Mathematics</li> </ul>	<p>Impact on skill related to academic achievement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- oral language</li> <li>- reading</li> <li>- written language</li> <li>- mathematics</li> </ul>
<p>No use of discrepancy model. The disorder results from impairments in one or more psychological processes related to learning</p>	<p>One or more scores on a standardized test of skills related to academic achievement is at least 2 standard deviations below the IQ or Composite score reported above</p>
<p>During the school years LDs are suggested by unexpectedly low achievement or achievement that is sustainable only by extremely high levels of effort and support</p>	<p>Significant delay in current academic achievement relative to curriculum expectations for the student’s appropriate age/grade placement</p>

**Differential Requirements for ISA Profile 3 Learning Disability, Levels 2 and 3**

ISA Profile 3 Learning Disability also requires Evidence of Related Difficulties. Level 3 has more stringent requirements than Level 2.

<b>ISA Profile 3 Level 2</b>	<b>ISA Profile 3 Level 3</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Significant delay in current academic achievement relative to curriculum expectations for the student’s appropriate age/grade placement; and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Meets criteria for Evidence of Related Difficulties in Level 2;</li> <li>○ And</li> <li>○ Demonstrates all, or almost all of the time, one of the following:</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Behaviours that significantly affect learning. e.g.,             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- temper outbursts</li> <li>- inappropriate social behaviour</li> <li>- social isolation or peer rejection</li> <li>- forgetfulness</li> <li>- significant motor difficulties</li> <li>- clumsiness</li> <li>- attentional difficulties</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- inattention and impulsivity</li> <li>- difficulty with self-control</li> <li>- anxiety</li> <li>- depression</li> <li>- behaviours resulting from a medical condition that interferes with the learning process (e.g., seizures, balance or gait problems, speech/language difficulties).</li> </ul>
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In ISA Profile 3.3, the severity test is made more stringent by the inclusion of a formal diagnosis of a medical condition that significantly exacerbates the problems with learning

- By a member of the College of Psychologists or a member of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of one of the following comorbid disorders:
  - Attention – Deficit and Disruptive Behaviour Disorders
  - Tourette’s
  - Anxiety or Mood Disorder

OR

- by a member of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of a medical condition that affects learning: e.g.
  - Cerebral Palsy
  - Spina Bifida
  - Hydrocephalus
  - Acquired Brain Injury
  - Epilepsy
  - Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Further criteria for ISA Claims submitted for Profiles 3.2 / 3.3 Learning Disability include evidence of educational needs and programmes. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is required.

<b>ISA Profile 3 Level 2</b>	<b>ISA Profile 3 Level 3</b>
<p>Evidence of Needs and Program as Indicated in IEP:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Program is developed by, or in conjunction with a qualified special education teacher; and</li> <li>○ Program includes significant accommodations to demonstrate achievement of the expectations; and</li> <li>○ Modified and/or alternative curriculum expectations for 51% to 80% of the program to address</li> </ul>	<p>-Evidence of Needs and Program as indicated in IEP:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Meets all <b>three</b> criteria for evidence of curriculum needs identified in IEP in Level 2 with modified and/or alternative curriculum expectations for 81% to 100% of the program; and</li> <li>○ Program includes goals and expectations to address one of the following:                     <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ – inattention and impulsivity</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ - Achievement or curriculum expectations in areas of identified need, including organizational strategies for spoken or written thoughts and/or time management</li> <li>○ - Behaviour management skills; and</li> <li>○ -Self-advocacy skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ difficulty with self-control</li> <li>○ anxiety</li> <li>○ depression</li> <li>○ behaviours resulting from a medical condition that interferes with the learning process (e.g. seizures, balance or gait problems, speech difficulties)</li> </ul>
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In addition, the ISA profiles also require evidence of intensive support required by the student.

<b>ISA Profile 3 Level 2</b>	<b>ISA Profile 3 Level 3</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ IEP and timetable indicate the program is delivered by, or in conjunction with a qualified special education teacher; and</li> <li>○ IEP and timetable indicate that specialized support personnel (e.g. educational assistant, child and youth worker, psychologist, qualified speech/language pathologist; social worker, behaviour consultant) provide frequent support during the school day to address the identified needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ IEP and timetable indicate that the program is delivered by a qualified special education teacher for a minimum of 25% of the instructional day; and</li> <li>○ IEP and timetable indicate that a range of specialized support personnel (e.g. educational assistant, child and youth worker, psychologist, qualified speech/language pathologist; social worker, behaviour consultant) provide almost constant support during the school day to address the identified needs</li> </ul>

**Can an individual meet all three definitions of Learning Disability?**

An individual usually begins with a psychological assessment, which determines whether he or she meets diagnostic criteria for a learning disability. The assessment provides a statement of the individual’s strengths and needs.

The Exceptionality Learning Disability does not require a diagnosis of Learning Disability.

The ISA Profiles 3.2 and 3.3 Learning Disability do require a diagnosis of Learning Disability



	<b>Diagnosis of Learning Disability</b>	<b>No Diagnosis of Learning Disability</b>
IPRC identification of Exceptional: Learning Disability	Possible	Possible
ISA Profile 3 Learning Disability	Possible	Not Possible

### **And In Conclusion:**

Three different concepts all use the term, “Learning Disability”. This overlap in terminology has created considerable confusion for consumers. Perhaps the best way to work through the confusion is to think first about the individual, and second about the institutions that provide services.

Individuals who have difficulty learning need to know why. They need to know their learning strengths and weaknesses, and whether they have a neuropsychological disorder which is diagnosed as a Learning Disability. They need a good psychological assessment by a Psychologist or Psychological Associate who is authorized to make a differential diagnosis of a specific Learning Disability, since there are many subtypes. The assessment should also state the modifications and accommodations needed for success at school or in the workplace. With that information, the individual can make an informed choice about seeking the support and services from institutions that will meet their needs.

Think next about the institutions and agencies that provide support for persons with learning disabilities. Each institution sets its own criteria for determining which persons to serve. The Education Act sets eligibility criteria for special education in elementary and secondary schools. The Identification, Placement and Review Committee (I.P.R.C.) identifies “Exceptional Students” under the Category, “Learning Disability”. Surprisingly, this Exceptionality identification does not require a diagnosis of learning disability. However, the I.P.R.C. relies heavily on psychological assessment reports of the learning strengths and needs of a student to determine whether to identify a student with a “Learning Disability”. The level of special education programming provided is likely to be linked to the severity of the learning needs, as determined by the psychological assessment and other educational documents.

Each institution and agency sets its own eligibility criteria for providing service to persons with “Learning Disabilities”. Not all require a diagnosis of Learning Disability, but some do. Not all require an identification of “Exceptional: Learning Disability”, but some do. Some use severity tests based on psychological and educational test scores, and others do not. Persons who seek services from institutions and agencies need to become aware of the eligibility criteria that each one sets.

Finally, matching the ISA funding profile 3.2 or 3.3, Learning Disability serves the sole purpose of generating funding to support District School Boards in providing special education programmes and services to students. Individuals are well advised to permit

their personal information to be used for an ISA claim, since it will generate the funding that provides them with the service that they need at school.