

What is the Difference between a Learning Difficulty and a Learning Disability?

This is important as it will explain why remedial methods we use work for some children but just won't work for other.

There will be students requiring Tier one and Tier two intervention who have a learning difficulty and others who have a learning disability/disorder. So, what is the difference?

Learning Difficulties

Tier 2 small group intervention might include students with **learning difficulties** who underachieve for a number of reasons for example:

- Lack of Opportunity at home e.g. few books, parents not reading to them, low vocabulary levels
- Instructional Casualties due to poor teaching or the wrong intervention being offered
- English as a second Language (ESL)
- Sensory impairment: sight and hearing for example
- Behavioural or emotional issues
- Attentional problems
- Global Development Delay; significant delay in two or more developmental domains. Not necessarily an intellectual impairment. Could be motor, speech and language, social.

These students have extrinsic factors which have caused a gap in their learning. We can identify the difficulties, intervene with programs that incorporate appropriate support and evidence-based instruction and close the gap. Once the gap is closed there is normally no need to offer any additional accommodations, resources or strategies in class.

This is not the case for students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia because the contributing factors to their learning difficulties are intrinsic, they are lifelong.

Learning Disabilities, such as dyslexia are not associated with intelligence, in fact, they can occur across the range of intellectual ability. Twice exceptional (2e) students, for example are gifted in certain areas and have a learning disability. Students with learning disabilities have difficulties in specific areas of academic achievement as a result of impairment in two or more of the cognitive processes related to learning. These difficulties are intrinsic, lifelong and pervasive, and do not always respond readily to education intervention.

If we identify the difficulties and intervene early it is possible to close the gap between age and reading and spelling abilities however, these students will always require additional support in class because those cognitive weaknesses will always exist. If a student, for example, has weak auditory processing ability or weak working memory then we may always need to chunk instructions, write the list of activities on the board, allow more time to answer questions, complete exams etc.