THE POLITICS OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

The field of learning disabilities (LD) is inherently political. That politics is integral to the LD field should not be surprising since LD was, to a significant extent, a political creation. The development and implementation of LD programs and services required significant political action. Although initiated through political action, the LD concept was based on a scientific foundation outlining a concept that described a particular form of learning problem. As is the case with most phenomena in the behavioral sciences, LD was ultimately a creation of scientific and political forces.

A primary difficulty presently appears to be the imbalance between the scientific and political sides of LD, with the scales heavily tipped in favor of the political. With the political predominant, policy decisions are primarily based on ideology and philosophy at the expense of the logical and rational represented in scientific decision making. Neither basis for decision making is exclusive, and right reason is best achieved through considering both scientific and political aspects. A totally scientific LD may become too rigid and narrow, and unresponsive to real-world contingencies. On the other hand, a totally political LD may lack clarity and definition, and be too responsive to real-world contingencies. Consequently, LD requires a balance; its proper role is best described as a scientific entity meeting real-world demands.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that this balance has been lost, and that LD presently possesses a much more exclusive political character than may be appropriate. The political manifestations have taken a variety of forms and have created a number of difficulties.

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second concept relates to the nature of the condition embodied in the notion of "specific," which suggested two things: neurological dysfunction and processing deficits. The etiology of the condition was presumed to be neurological involvement ranging from actual damage to more subclinical types of dysfunction. The neurological dysfunction had, as its most direct manifestation, a variety of psychological processing deficits that interfered with the acquisition, assimilation, and storage of information. The processing deficits were the reason for academic problems in reading, writing, and math, for example. Thus, LD was presumed specific with respect to a discrete number of processing problems resulting from neurological dysfunction that ultimately interfered with academic performance. The resulting problems did not represent a generalized failure like that found in mental retardation (MR), but average cognitive abilities that were being interfered with because of specific processing deficits or deficits that were at least presumed to affect only specific areas of functioning.

Thus, LD was created as a discrete category to describe academic problems, particularly underachievement, that resulted from specific deficits. Conceptually, LD differed from MR with respect to IQ level (LD was not associated with below-average intellectual performance) and an ability profile indicating both strengths and weaknesses rather than the flat and depressed profile associated with MR. The focus on academic problems, rather than behavior problems, differentiated LD from emotional or behavior disorders (E/BD). Thus, LD, as the newest category in special education, fit a niche by describing a classification of neurologically based learning disorders that resulted primarily from a variety of processing deficits. Thus, specific LD was a circumscribed category describing a particular form of underachievement and not a general form of low achievement.

The problems, however, were the difficulties in validating the notions of neurological dysfunction and processing deficits (particularly the poor reliabilities and validities of perceptual-motor tests, the major processes emphasized in the early development of LD). Slowly, these basic foundation concepts of LD were abandoned in favor of the more readily (and conveniently) documented underachievement in the form of discrepancy (see Kavale, 1987). Although discrepancy denotes a difference between expected and actual achievement, there was inexorable movement towards an emphasis on the actual achievement part of the equation that in all cases of LD is depressed and below average. Thus, the concept of underachievement, critical for LD conceptualization, was essentially replaced by low achievement, a condition manifested theoretically by 50% of the population. As foundation concepts of LD were ignored, classification increasingly became predicated on poor academic performance alone, and other factors (e.g., neurological dysfunction, process deficits, underachievement) were assumed rather than explicitly validated. Under such circumstances, it is easy to see how the LD concept lost its integrity, and an increasing number of students became eligible under these limited and less-than-rigorous criteria.

**The LD Problem**

The consequences of the loss of integrity in the LD concept are found in a failure to have confidence in who is designated LD. In turn, the integrity problems reduce confidence in research findings because of the problems related to external validity. Are the subjects being studied truly LD? Can we legitimately generalize findings to other LD subjects? With answers to these questions often in the negative, research in LD becomes limited, and enhancing the concept becomes problematic. Research findings, under such circumstances, become independent and isolated and do not contribute to greater understanding of the LD concept. A peculiar situation is created whereby more research results in less understanding, which is not the hallmark of a scientifically sound concept. Without a more focused concept, there exists an inherent vagueness whereby LD means whatever we want it to mean. Thus, with the loss of a scientific foundation to provide a logical and rational base, LD becomes increasingly vulnerable to political manifestations that may be in conflict with the scientific foundation. A tension is created that results in dissension and debate about the very nature of the condition—a situation that is descriptive of the LD field today.

**POLITICS AS ADVOCACY**

**Advocacy Defined**

Within the context of its political character, the most prominent theme in LD appears to be advocacy, social action directed at creating programs and services to meet the needs and interests of
students with LD. After disparate concepts about learning disorders were integrated and the LD field was officially recognized, science became secondary to politics, particularly as encompassed in the energizing force of advocacy. Ideally, a scientific LD would direct activity towards enhancing the LD concept, while a political LD would foster implementation of the scientific developments through rational policy formation based on these scientific developments. The system, however, became primarily political and, with little reliance on science, the political character became defined by advocacy.

Advocacy is a legitimate political activity, but, when placed in a political context devoid of a scientific foundation, it takes on the nature of the dominant political philosophy of the time. In this sense, the political side of LD possesses an essentially liberal character that is captured in the notion of entitlement. The focus is on providing programs and services because students are entitled to receive them. An objective assessment of the presence or absence of LD is replaced by the presumption of LD. The fact of LD, which should primarily be a scientific decision, becomes secondary to the desire for providing services. Action begins at the point of proclaiming a student as LD, with limited attention directed at the validity of the designation. By its nature, advocacy places less emphasis on the classification process, and as the process continues, it is possible to raise questions about who is being served: Are they "truly" LD? This is not an inconsequential question, but the present advocacy stance in LD appears to suggest that it does not make any real difference as long as the student in question receives the assistance he or she presumably requires.

Biklen and Zollers (1986), for example, outlined a focus of advocacy for the LD field, with no mention of enhancing the LD concept. Instead, a blueprint is presented that emphasizes (a) increasing public awareness of the LD experience, (b) minimizing negative consequences of the LD experience, (c) pursuing disability rights, (d) joining and expanding the school reform movement, and (e) making integration the centerpiece of LD advocacy. There appears to be little discomfort about the fact that LD is not defined in any precise sense. While it is acknowledged that students with LD do not share a common perspective on what the label or concept means to them, this appears to be secondary to programmatic considerations, including cooperative learning or consulting teacher models in intervention activities. A rational system would demand a clear and unencumbered LD definition wherein individual students would be required to meet stipulated parameters before intervention begins. This would permit greater focus for intervention, and more assurance in evaluating outcomes because of the confidence in the "LD-ness" of the individuals.

A more rational (and conservative) approach to advocacy would view it as a dual process. First, a scientific decision would be rendered about whether or not a student meets the parameters for classification in the LD category; second, if qualified, efforts would be directed at designing and finding programs and services best suited to the individual's needs. Advocacy, in the sense of representing or speaking for others to achieve particular outcomes, is justified for both parts of the process as long as final decisions are made in an objective and systematic manner. The present advocacy stance in LD has failed to recognize that special education possesses two aspects, understanding and helping, with both being necessary to create an efficient and comprehensive system. Instead, the present advocacy stance clearly emphasizes helping at the expense of understanding. The consequences are found in a failure to achieve any confidence about whether or not the individual being served is LD, and whether or not the intervention activities represent an optimal combination of programs and methods.

The Consequences of Advocacy

Advocacy as practiced in the LD field has been enormously successful. Since the passage of Public Law 94-142 (now Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the LD population has increased by approximately 150%. The history of special education indicates that an increase of this magnitude is unprecedented and unparalleled. When translated into percent of students in special education, the LD classification now represents 50%. Is this at all justified? Could any rational analysis of special education ever anticipate that one-half of all students identified be subsumed under a single category? Still another way to view LD numbers is in terms of the percent of all students in school. That figure is about 5% and, when placed in the context of an upper limit of 2% for this category originally proposed as a mandate in PL 94-142, it is evident that LD
exceeds that figure by about 2 1/2 times. Should LD be the size that it is? Could anyone have anticipated in 1970, for example, that LD would expand to its present proportions?

**Prevalence of LD**

Regardless of the difficulties in answering these questions, there appears to be some discomfort about the fact that the LD population is too large. Any more precise response is difficult because the scientific side of LD has failed to determine prevalence—the total number of existing cases in the population at a given point in time. Prevalence is best derived from epidemiological studies that investigate the amount and distribution of a particular condition over time. While epidemiological studies are best accomplished when classification can be based on “all-or-none” criteria (e.g., physical syndromes), they are still tenable for behavioral syndromes that possess discrete and measurable signs like MR (e.g., IQ cut-off scores, adaptive behavior ratings, some physical signs) (see Gruenberg, 1964; Heber, 1970). In contrast, the failure to identify and confirm behavioral signs for LD has resulted in epidemiological studies being of limited value (e.g., Minskoff, 1973; Walzer & Richmond, 1973).

In place of true epidemiological studies, the LD field has attempted to derive prevalence estimates through empirical extrapolation from the testing of large samples. Such cross-sectional designs, where large samples are assessed to determine what proportion meets a specified set of LD identification criteria, are at the mercy of the set of criteria selected. With little consensus on what LD identification criteria should be, it is not surprising that, using this methodology, prevalence estimates have ranged from 2% to 30% (e.g., Meier, 1971; Myklebust & Boshes, 1960; Nichols & Chen, 1981; Shaywitz, Shaywitz, Fletcher, & Escobar, 1990).

Another approach to determining prevalence is for national organizations to issue policy estimates. Over time, these figures have varied from 1% to 15%, with the current estimate being 5% to 10% (Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities [ICLD], 1987). This process is inherently political. The decisions about prevalence are not based on scientific grounds—but political considerations—primarily, the call to serve more students under the LD rubric. Under such circumstances, LD prevalence estimates become unidirectional with a strong bias towards increasing prevalence. What if a national organization with a different political philosophy and scientific rationale made a compelling case for an LD prevalence rate of 3%? The dilemma becomes obvious, since the primary question would be: What happens to the other 2% of students now classified as LD?

Because of the pragmatic difficulties in establishing a true prevalence for LD, the scientific side of LD has failed to answer a most fundamental question: How many students with LD should there be? Instead, the political side of LD has decided on an ever-increasing prevalence that can accommodate the effects of its advocacy activities. It should be noted that the increasing prevalence does not appear to be a source of concern; the failure to understand LD in a scientific sense means that there is no discomfort as the LD population increases. Rather, as the percentages rise, the new and increased figure becomes the norm. For example, Kavale and Reese (1991), in a survey of teacher beliefs and perceptions about LD, asked respondents to mark a prevalence rate on a scale ranging from 1% to 40%. There was considerable variability in responses, but the mean figure was 6%, suggesting that such a figure has become the normative standard for viewing LD numbers. For LD, the process of determining prevalence has become predominantly political when it should be more scientific to possess credibility.

With respect to prevalence, difficulties are not only present in determining an overall prevalence rate, but consequences are also apparent in how the LD population is distributed. For example, prevalence ranges from 1.51% (Wyoming) to 6.11% (Alaska), and LD as percent of students with disabilities ranges from 31.9% (Georgia) to 64.5% (Rhode Island). A total of 27 states reveal LD as a percent of all disabilities greater than 50% and 7 states exceed a 60% figure. The most striking feature is the lack of any observable pattern. For example, among midwestern states, the prevalence ranges from 2.23% (Wisconsin) to 4.06% (Illinois), while even more variability is apparent among southern states where prevalence ranges from 2.00% (Georgia) to 4.83% (Tennessee).

It has been argued that the prevalence of LD is no more variable than that found among lower prevalence categories that have been assumed to demonstrate greater consistency (Hallahan, Keller, & Ball, 1986). This perception was challenged
(see Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1987), and the arguments increasingly surrounded the proper empirical technique for addressing the question of variability. In many respects, the debate is futile since it is not grounded in a structure that provides confidence about “true” prevalence rates. The lack of both baseline data about prevalence and justification for differing prevalence rates among states suggests that a multiplicity of perspectives appears equally valid. Until reliable and valid prevalence data are forthcoming, little science can be applied and most discussions about prevalence, therefore, take on a solely political character.

**LD, MR, and BD: Shifting Populations**

The success of advocacy in the LD field has created a juxtaposition in the way students are distributed in special education. The LD category is part of the special education domain termed “mildly handicapped,” which also includes mild MR and E/BD. The mildly handicapped group represents about 75% of the special education population, with LD being almost 75% of that mildly handicapped group. These numbers are reflective of the upward trend in the LD population. In contrast, the trend for MR is downward, and although the E/BD category reveals a modest upward trend, it remains underrepresented as evidenced by the differences in the absolute number of students served under the LD (2.5 million) and E/BD (500,000) classifications out of a total special education population of about 5 million.

The downward trend in MR to a prevalence rate of about 1% is noteworthy since it is the single mildly handicapped group for which assumptions about prevalence can be made. Using percentages from a normal distribution, MR should reveal a prevalence of about 2%-2.5%. What has happened to 1%-1.5% of students who might be expected to be classified MR? Have there been major advances in prevention and intervention to justify the significant reduction in prevalence? The differences between expected and actual rates cannot be attributed to any major scientific advances, and the reduced prevalence of MR can be attributed to political decisions.

A primary political consideration in the reduced prevalence of MR is the demonization of IQ tests, which has led to significant reductions in their use for MR classification decisions. Although an IQ cutoff score is still mandated, a larger social system model has become dominant, which includes environmental variables and differing conceptualizations of intelligence (see MacMillan, Gresham, & Siperstein, 1993). In addition, the use of IQ tests has met with judicial restraints, most notably outlined in the Larry P. case (1984), even though the decision was roundly criticized (MacMillan & Meyers, 1980). These new views of MR are based primarily on political and judicial decisions and have had significant impact. In California, the state most affected by these changes in MR, Forness (1985) found that the changes resulted in a 37% decrease in the MR population, which reduced the prevalence rate to 0.6%.

The reduced prevalence rate in MR has had two consequences. The first is greater confidence in the validity of students now being classified as MR; the second is a change in the nature of the MR population (MacMillan, Siperstein, & Gresham, 1996). It has become evident that the present MR population is more impaired (e.g., lower average IQ, less academic ability, a greater number of associated deficits) than the same population of 20 years ago (MacMillan & Borthwick, 1980; Polloway & Smith, 1988). Although not as unambiguous, E/BD has shown a similar pattern over time: inclusion of more seriously disturbed students accompanied by less equivocation about whether or not the student in question is truly BD (Forness & Kavale, 1997).

Although the changes in MR and E/BD may be viewed as a positive trend, there are serious consequences directly affecting LD. Regardless of how MR and E/BD are defined in terms of their individual characteristics, they share, along with LD, a fundamental characteristic of impaired learning performance; a basic similarity among the conditions is school failure. The difficulties in distinguishing among MR, BD, and LD have been well documented (see Hallahan & Kauffman, 1977), but a common element is poor academic performance, which is the probable reason for coming to the attention of special education in the first place. In many respects, the fact of MR, E/BD, or LD is secondary to the school learning difficulties that become the focus of attention, with classification serving solely as a means of entry into special education.

Within the context of mild disabilities, advocacy has made the need for special education the primary criterion for receiving service, with the validity of any classification being of secondary importance. Nevertheless, the structure of special education demands a classification prior to entering
the system, and the question surrounds which mildly handicapped category is to be preferred. With the MR and E/BD fields, either consciously or not, demanding more stringent diagnostic criteria, it has become increasingly difficult for students to qualify. Yet, it is probable that such students require special education, and the only entry is through the remaining mildly handicapped classification: LD.

With its well-known problem of definition resulting in vague and ill-defined boundaries, it is relatively easy for a student to qualify as LD. The LD category has thus become a catch-all classification with little substantive foundation. Research demonstrating a decline in IQ scores and the increasing recognition of social/emotional deficits among students with LD reveals a fundamental change in the nature of LD caused by incorporating students who would previously have been designated MR or E/BD. Thus, LD covers not only students experiencing specific academic difficulties but also those who possess learning problems with an overlay of lowered intellectual ability or mild behavior problems. When combined with the perception that LD is a “better,” less stigmatizing, and more acceptable classification, the desire for LD, rather than MR or E/BD, designation becomes irresistible and the political climate appears quite willing to accommodate this desire.

LD: The Loss of Integrity

The present situation has led to a description of LD as a sponge wiping up the spills of general education. Senf (1987) suggested that, “The LD sponge grew so fast because it was able to absorb a diversity of educational/behavioral/socioemotional problems irrespective of their cause, their stabilization, their remediation, or their progress” (p. 91). This sponge metaphor with its negative implications should be a source of concern, but in the present political climate of LD it does not appear to be troubling. What is paramount is that more students be served. The mindset is one that assumes that as long as students experiencing school difficulties receive service, the system is doing well. It is of little import that the system cannot with any confidence demonstrate the validity of the presumed classifications. This is a secondary consideration that is overwhelmed by the assumption that valid diagnosis is, at best, a necessary evil in the face of the real purpose: to provide special education at any cost.

Under such circumstances, it is not difficult to see why the LD field has lost its fundamental integrity: We have no idea whom we are serving. As an example, a recent study of students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and E/BD found that one third of the former and one half of the latter were identified in the LD category, with only 2% of the ADHD and none of the E/BD served in the federal serious emotional disturbance category (Lopez, Forness, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 1996). The emphasis on helping has essentially undermined any opportunity for enhanced understanding. Any form of learning difficulty, mild or severe, specific or non-specific, short- or long-standing, is considered LD, and this sets in motion the process that far more often than not results in LD classification and special education.

A more conservative approach, in the classic sense of a basic aim of conservation, would demand that service be provided only to those truly in need. There would be a demand that students meet a stipulated set of criteria before receiving service. One of the consequences of advocacy has been the elimination of identification criteria to the point where LD has essentially a single criterion, discrepancy, the difference between expected and actual achievement (Mercer, Jordan, Allsopp, & Mercer, 1996). This “imperial criterion” (see Mather & Healey, 1990) possesses a number of psychometric and statistical difficulties, but the major problem resides in its theoretical foundation: discrepancy is the operational definition for underachievement, and LD is not the equivalent of underachievement (Kavale, 1987). But discrepancy is convenient, efficient, and easily manipulated, which makes it an ideal criterion when the goal is not to determine whether a student is really LD but to provide that student with special education.

The Problem of the Slow Learner

Historically, the most problematic portion of the school population are “slow learners,” students with IQ levels between 70 and 90. Such students would not qualify for MR classification because they do not meet the traditional two-standard deviations below the mean criterion. Such students, however, should not be eligible for LD classification either; traditionally, LD is associated with average IQ levels in order for the learning failure to be unexpected. If, for example, average IQ is posited at 85 and above, about 14% of the population would not be eligible for
either MR or LD. Historically, there has been no special education classification for this slow-learner group, but the advocacy stance in LD has considered it necessary to subsume their group.

Early on (e.g., Ames, 1968), it was suggested that LD was associated with low intelligence, which was followed by arguments that LD could apply to students at any IQ level (Cruickshank, 1977). This change in attitude about the relationship between LD and intelligence level along with changes in MR causing many students to be reclassified as LD (see Forness, 1972) resulted in LD samples being found to possess IQ levels in the low-average (70-84) range (e.g., Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb, & Wishner, 1994; Smith, Coleman, Dokecki, & Davis, 1977) and in the lower regions of the average (85-99) range (e.g., Norman & Zigmond, 1980). Samples of students with LD demonstrated considerable variability in intellectual ability (e.g., Lally, Lloyd, & Kulberg, 1987), with anywhere from 10% to 40% having IQ levels below 80 (e.g., Shepard, Smith, & Vojir, 1983).

Clearly, the desire to provide special education to students not previously eligible has modified the nature of LD with respect to intelligence level (Belmont & Belmont, 1980). It is evident that advocacy has changed the parameters of LD to include a new class of student with low intelligence, and this has increased the population by 14% to 20% depending on the IQ cut-off chosen. With the changes induced by advocacy, LD has successfully included the slow-learner group but in doing so has contorted its basic character and undermined its scientific integrity.

Advocacy has successfully incorporated a portion of the school population (i.e., slow learner) under the LD rubric, and it is not difficult to conceive of the trend continuing until one-half of the school population is classified as LD. Unfortunately, Lake Wobegon, where all students are above average, does not exist, and if achievement is considered a normally distributed trait, then one-half of the school population is below average. The liberal mind finds this disconcerting and unacceptable even though it is a reality that has existed since schooling began. An assault on those who achieve is one response where the system is geared to a “dumbing down” process as embodied, for example, in outcome-based education that eliminates any objective standards for assessing outcomes. Another response is to improve school performance through special education that is essentially individualized instruction in an enhanced environment. This response requires that students first pass through a classification system to legitimize their entry into the system. Consequently, the easier the entry, the faster the student receives special education. The present political climate in LD has made entry easy by diluting the original concept to the point where a student need meet only the single criterion of discrepancy, which itself has been diluted to the point of losing its meaning.

The Problem of Low Achievement

Being designated LD has become relatively effortless and risk-free, as attested to by the present number of students with LD. Like the 1950s’ movie “The Blob,” LD has captured a large number of students, including a significant portion who are low achievers, not underachievers as originally intended. The LD idea possesses a fundamental notion of unexpected school failure that is defined through the concept of underachievement (Thorndike, 1963). When only one-half of the underachievement concept is considered (i.e., the actual achievement level without regard for the predicted achievement level), it is easy to see why LD includes a number of students whose sole problem is low achievement.

This dilemma is illustrated in a series of studies conducted at the University of Minnesota Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities (IRLD). Most notable was an investigation by Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, and McGue (1982), which demonstrated a large degree of overlap between test scores of LD and low-achieving (LA) groups to the point that it was not possible to differentiate group membership clearly. These findings were taken to mean that efforts at differentiation were futile, and that LD should be abandoned in favor of a more general concept encompassing primarily low achievement.

The interpretation of this study had two consequences. The first was a weakening of the LD concept and the call for its abandonment; the second was a broadening of the parameters through which a student might receive special education. This interpretation, however, must be understood as being primarily political, not scientific. In a political zeitgeist that views special education not as a separate system but as one that should be integrated into a more unified and inclusive educational system, an interpretation emphasizing the difficulty in distinguishing LD and LA is the
politically correct stance. In essence, the conclusion becomes, "Why bother to differentiate LD and LA students?" The emphasis should be on providing service, especially in the context of more inclusive schools that eliminate the past evils of special education (e.g., special class).

The assumption that political, rather than scientific, concerns directed this interpretation was provided by Kavale, Fuchs, and Scruggs (1994). In a reanalysis using the effect-size statistic from meta-analysis to calculate the magnitude of group differentiation, it was demonstrated that LD and LA groups did, in fact, show performance differences on achievement measures. The students with LD were the lowest of the low on the achievement distribution. In further analysis of the original data, it became patently clear that the groups differed on achievement variables but not on ability variables. Why then the failure to interpret properly the original data?

The answer is found in one word: politics. Research is not necessarily an objective and value-free process, but one that can become subjective and value-laden, especially when driven by political, rather than scientific, concerns. The IRLD studies suffer from a heavy dose of politics influencing their interpretation (see Kavale, 1995, for a discussion). When interpreted properly, the IRLD studies provide for some optimism. Even with all the vagaries surrounding LD classification, there appears to be a discernible component related to low functioning in the achievement domain. Consequently, there would be benefits in exploring further how LD groups differ from others in hopes of crystallizing the nature of LD. Such activities might eliminate the "LD problem" and propel the field towards better understanding in the sense of actually knowing what it is we are talking about. This is also a political decision and requires a shift in advocacy from an emphasis solely on programs and services to one that emphasizes diagnosis and classification as an equally important consideration.

The Expanding Boundaries of Advocacy

Advocacy may emphasize different groups at different times. For example, the LD phenomenon was originally conceptualized as an elementary-level problem. In many respects, LD remains an elementary-level phenomenon, with referrals reaching their highest level during grades 3 and 4. Nevertheless, the LD concept was expanded to include adolescents, preschoolers, and adults, and it is possible to discern trends in the literature for each of these levels. Advocacy was the driving force in developing these areas and in establishing programs and services at each level.

The danger is the lack of understanding about the nature of LD at each level. If LD at the elementary level is not understood fully, and if a majority of research efforts have been directed at the elementary population, then LD at these other levels is probably even less well understood. The poorly articulated conceptualizations at these levels suggest that vagaries surrounding LD classification are magnified and lead to critical questions about the validity of individual diagnoses. With advocacy the preeminent theme, however, the associated lack of understanding and potential misclassifications are again minor concerns.

Presently, the LD advocates appear to be targeting college-level students in the ever-expanding LD population. Over the past several years, the college-level LD population has increased significantly along with a concomitant increase in programs and services. Fully 5% of full-time college students identify themselves as LD, but the validity of their diagnoses is open to serious questions (Lewin, 1996). Although colleges and universities need to serve students with LD, for legal reasons if nothing more, the numbers are growing geometrically and defy logic.

The most troubling aspect of the increasing numbers of students with LD at the college level is the fact that about 40%-50% received their initial LD diagnosis in college. Consider that you are talking about students who have had 12 years of schooling with no special assistance, who have had acceptable academic careers, and who have met college entrance requirements. How does one become LD under such circumstances? After all, LD is not something that you "catch" as you might catch a cold. It is probably best to view LD within a developmental perspective, since its foundations are present early and historically come to the fore during the elementary-school years. Most of the literature on adolescent and adult LD is based on children with LD who have grown up. In contrast, we now have a substantial LD population of college students who in almost half the cases does not reveal this developmental perspective.

In some instances, it is probable that the student was able to make accommodations on his or her own and successfully cope with academic demands, but finds that the new and different
skills often required in college are more difficult to cope with. When accommodations fail, this leads to the recognition of learning problems. Although accurate in some cases, this scenario cannot explain the approximate 50% of students without a prior history of LD who are now classified LD.

The college curriculum has not changed radically over the past 10 years (except perhaps by becoming easier!) to warrant a spate of LD. It would appear, therefore, that other dynamics are operating, and one possibility is the influence of advocacy. For example, while disabilities are real with respect to the limitations and constraints they impose, the fact that you cannot do something, possibly because it is difficult or because you lack the requisite skills and find it frustrating, does not mean you possess a disability. Just because you find the math or foreign language requirement (the most frequently cited reason for self-referral) difficult does not suggest the presence of a learning disability specific to these areas. Yet, the predominant advocacy theme of entitlement appears to support this view. When combined with a lack of understanding and a sometimes vague or less than rigorous evaluation, the scale is tipped heavily in favor of a classification as LD with the resulting accommodations.

Can such a scenario be justified? Can there be any confidence in the validity of the LD classification? Although fully justified in cases of “true” LD and necessary to level the playing field, in at least 40% of cases accommodations provide the presumed student with LD an unfair advantage. Support services and accommodations cover a wide spectrum from the simple (and most common) such as extended time on tests to the complex, such as taped textbooks, note takers in class, different assignments, tests in different rooms, or waivers of requirements, to cite some examples. What about the student who also finds the academic requirements difficult but demonstrates a willingness to tough it out? Would he or she not be aided by the same accommodations?

The present situation surrounding college-level LD provides a prime example of advocacy gone amok. So overwhelming is the notion of entitlement that it is sacrilegious to raise even legitimate questions about the number of students being certified. The story in The New York Times (Lewin, February 13, 1996) about Boston University’s decision to require anyone seeking assistance for LD to submit a diagnostic evaluation less than three years old was met with cries of “shock” and “outrage” and was called a “declaration of war on these kids.” An administrator of a student disability resource center worried about what such an action would do. What it would do is restore integrity to an egregious system as well as relieve an undue financial burden just because some students find the university difficult (probably true since universities began) and advocacy permitted them to proclaim themselves LD with a high probability that it would be endorsed.

**Advocacy and LD**

It appears that advocacy represents a major political theme in LD. A case could be made that the large numbers of students with LD, to the point where LD is by far the largest category in special education, could be attributed in large measure to advocacy. The desire to provide special education for any student experiencing school difficulties has created a situation where students are presumed entitled to special education when any achievement problem surfaces. The minimal stigma and favorable attitudes surrounding LD have made advocacy the vehicle through which something is achieved (i.e., special education) without undue burden. In this sense, advocacy is good politics and permits LD to be a “safety valve” wherein students falling between the cracks receive the required services presumed to enhance their academic performance.

Unfortunately, advocacy is not without consequences. Rather than a safety valve, LD may be better viewed as a “dumping ground” and the present numbers, without rhyme or reason, attest to this view. The large LD population has become increasingly ill defined, resulting in a vagueness surrounding the LD concept. In a majority of instances, it is possible to question the validity of LD diagnoses because of an inability to answer the question, “What is LD?” Thus, a situation is created where the political side of LD as embodied in advocacy appears to be doing well, but closer inspection reveals an increasing loss of integrity for the scientific status of LD. There is little confidence that we know what we are talking about with respect to LD, but there is little discomfort because of the appearance that LD is doing well. After all, look at the number of students being served. Isn’t this sufficient evidence that LD is doing well? The LD field, like the fabled emperor and his new clothes, seems to enjoy the status and prosperity that enable its nakedness to go undetected.
POLITICS AS IDEOLOGY

Origins of Ideology

As most categories in special education, LD has its roots in medicine. Histories of LD reveal origins in language and reading disorders emanating from neurological impairments. The study of dyslexia was particularly important because it examined not only the neurological origins of reading problems but also the notion of unexpected reading failure in otherwise average-functioning students. Later investigations demonstrated that language and perceptual-processing deficits were contributors to the underachievement manifested in reading. The later work of Strauss and Werner (see Strauss & Lehtinen, 1947) broadened the parameters to other academic areas, but all were still viewed within a medical model perspective.

When LD was formally recognized as a category of special education, a tension arose between its medical origins and its educational context. A medical model of LD is sufficient for conceptualizing the abstract nature of the condition but fails to include real-world contingencies like school. After all, students with LD are referred, diagnosed, and classified within the context of school. It is not difficult to imagine that without schools we would not have an LD category as we now know it. Thus, the field of medicine laid the foundation for LD but special education shaped its present form.

Once removed from a strict medical foundation, LD was subject to social influences. LD is presently a behavioral phenomenon where there may be a medical foundation that becomes secondary to the individual manifestations shaped by social forces in the environment. Within a social context, a major force can be found in political beliefs that present a variety of views about the way things are and the way things should be. It is these differing world views that have reshaped LD over time and that engender debate, not on scientific, but ideological grounds. Unlike advocacy, which is more concerned with political action, ideology focuses on the underlying political themes and ideas that direct action.

Within special education, ideology serves to guide broad goals and aims. Regardless of whether one adheres to a liberal or a conservative ideology, a shared goal has been the provision of equal educational opportunity to enable students to attain the knowledge and skills required to achieve personal success. The development of special education suggests that for some students with particular kinds of problems equal opportunity was not possible in a general education context. “Special” education was required for an equal education opportunity. Within this context, special education should not be viewed in a perjorative sense but as the optimal environment for a student experiencing particular difficulties in school.

The idea of equal educational opportunity has been subverted, however, by ideas that equate equality of opportunity with the results of education; unless all students perform equally well, the system is inherently unjust. Any educational system is responsible for providing access to knowledge, but the individual student is responsible for what he or she does with that opportunity. The greater difficulty encountered by special education students in accessing educational opportunities is the very reason why special education was created. The special education student is not relieved of the responsibility of achieving educational opportunity but is provided with a vehicle to obtain it. Even under the optimal circumstances provided by special education, the special education student must provide the ability, temperament, and motivation to succeed.

The aim of equal outcomes has also been exacerbated by the belief that every student’s potential for achievement is nearly unlimited. The tenor of this belief is captured in statements like, “After all, who is to say which individual may become another Shakespeare or Einstein?” Consequently, limitless opportunities to learn are to be provided. A problem is encountered, however, when a student does not possess the ability or motivation to succeed in such a no-limit environment. The problem is readily resolved by relaxing standards, but this leads to bogus outcomes that are unreliable and degraded. For special education, in particular, the focus on what is learned is of primary importance, but it is often subverted by debate about the proper amount of time spent in either general or special education, for example. By emphasizing firm and substantial standards, the quality of education is improved, and for a student meeting the standards, genuine achievement is gained because the opportunity in education has meant, in fact, the opportunity to go as far as talent and motivation permit.
The Problems of Marxist Educational Ideology

If equal educational opportunity is an agreed-upon ideology for both liberal and conservative perspectives, then how has it become subverted by the demand for unlimited potentials, relaxed standards, and equal outcomes? The answers are found partially in Marxist ideology, which frequently views schools as serving the interests of elites, as reinforcing inequalities, and as fostering attitudes to maintain the status quo (see Apple, 1979; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Sharp, 1980; for discussions). The standard Marxist approach to education features a rejection of “technical-functional” theories of education that emphasize the need for technical and vocational skills deriving from the changing occupational sectors of advanced industrial societies. Instead, Marxists view the major emphases in education as reproducing the “social relations of production.” In essence, technical-functional accounts of education are smoke screens set up to conceal a more basic ideological function of reproducing a passive and disciplined workforce rather than a dynamic one with new skills and abilities.

The reproduction of social relations is predicated on the assumption that educational differentiation and certification exist in order to provide a neutral and legitimate foundation for the unequal and hierarchical division of labor associated with capitalism. Additionally, education transmits appropriate attitudes and habits to each strata of the occupational hierarchy (e.g., elites receive an education that transmits values of leadership and autonomy while the education of the working class emphasizes rote learning and passive obedience). Thus, education’s primary aim is to maintain the capitalist social order, with social harmony dependent upon the working class being denied access to knowledge through the operations of a selective and differentiated educational system. Education plays a central role in the transmission of capitalist ideology and has become the dominant “ideological state apparatus.”

This brief sketch of Marxist views emphasizes broad societal concerns, but other analyses provide more focused views of education. For example, Young (1971) discussed knowledge, the acceptance of a “common culture,” and control, the imposition of meaning with respect to curriculum, context, and cognition abilities. Additional analyses (e.g., Giroux, 1981; Sarup, 1978) have emphasized the role of Marxist ideology in analyzing the relation between social philosophy and the mechanics of education (e.g., curriculum, methods). In practice, Marxist theorists have posited a number of alternatives including “deschooling,” an abandonment of traditional schools in favor of other educational arrangements (Illich, 1970).

Such Marxist analyses, however, potentially present a distorted world view. All criticisms are based on the assumption that government schools are nefarious ideological tools of the state that cannot be changed satisfactorily until the form of government (i.e., democratic to totalitarian) is replaced. Fortunately, this will never occur, and democracy, even with its faults, is here to stay much to the chagrin of Marxist’s critics. Furthermore, there is little evidence that education has performed the functions attributed to it by Marxist interpretations. There is also little evidence that the educational systems of capitalist societies either have been or are particularly critical in the reproduction of capitalist production relations. Finally, Marxist interpretations are not capable of accounting for major ongoing processes within capitalist educational systems as the traditional “technical-functional” theories that they criticize. Consequently, there is no necessary “fit” between any specific form of educational organization and the “needs” of capitalism. Thus, educational debates do not represent conflicts within a wider socioeconomic context. They only fulfill the ideological needs of “progressive” educators because of the potential for them to assume a revolutionary role if reproduction were dependent on education. Perhaps this hope and desire among “progressive” educators is the reason why Marxist views have demonstrated a certain popularity.

Whether the analyses are based on theories termed reproduction, conflict, social alienation, cultural deprivation, social construction, or authorization, or concepts like resistance, differentiation, allocation, labeling, indoctrination, interactionism, control, and so on, they all suffer the same fate: they are fundamentally flawed because they are based on visions of a world that, at least to date, seem never to have been. Their premium thus tends toward a fantastical ideal over reality and is the reason why Marxist analyses are not readily dislodged by logical and rational argument. Consequently, Marxist apologists are less inhibited by ignorance, but nonetheless possess an instinctual appeal.
LD: Marxist Views

A broad outline and critique of Marxist ideology in education was provided to give an overview of basic concepts and a sense of the way arguments are presented. Within special education, Marxist ideology has become fashionable as evidenced in social-constructivist theory, which holds that students with special needs are not really disabled because “disability” does not reside within the person but is invented by society for societal reasons (see Skrtic, 1991). This particular view has had the most influence on perceptions about LD, and it would be useful to examine the ways in which the origins and development of LD have been viewed within a Marxist ideological perspective.

Carrier (1986), using the orientation described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) to analyze LD theory, suggested that an emphasis on biophysical foundations for LD masks the societal forces (i.e., class) affecting academic performance. In essence, class conflicts have resulted in the construction of inequality in American education; “Marxist models suggest that learning disability theory might be explicable as a set of beliefs which legitimate capitalist inequality and social relations” (Carrier, 1986, p. 124). Rounding up the usual suspects of cultural deprivation theory, authorization theory, interactionism, and reproduction theory, Carrier attempted to place LD solely and exclusively within a social context without reference to any biophysical influences. It is finally concluded that LD represents “sociogenic brain damage” because it identifies a group of children whose mental and behavioral attributes conflict with those required for the smooth and profitable operation of American economy and society singling them out as an object lesson of what should not happen, a negative mirror image of socially approved values and attributes. (Carrier, 1986, p. 91)

Sigmon (1987), using radical socioeducational analysis, suggests a conflict perspective where “the root source of many social problems in America lies in the simultaneity of political freedom and economic inequality” (p. 76), and a reproduction theory where LD is “really an attempt to conserve and perpetuate the culture and its institutions of which the school is an important one” (p. 94).

The interpretation begins with an analysis of the LD problem that is followed by a new interpretation of the development of American special education and an analysis of the evolution of the LD concept. With respect to special education, Sigmon (1987) concluded that it is nothing more than a massive and formal mode of tracking. With respect to the history of LD, Sigmon accepted the conventional renderings but embellished them with notions about cultural influences, especially the study of individual differences. With the idea of mild mental retardation entrenched, LD developed as an idea about brain damage and average intelligence but merged with the notion of the slow learner. “This filled a void in American education to help deal with other academic non-conforming students . . . LD then, became institutionalized and produced new special segregated tracks” (Sigmon, 1987, p. 64). Finally, the LD controversy was examined, and the scientific and conceptual bases for LD are viewed as weak. Instead, a social basis was offered where there is in effect a ‘cultural reproduction-resistance dialectic’ which portrays the pushes and pulls of social class struggle. This struggle has led to the inadvertent co-operation of special education by including millions of so-called mildly handicapped children instead of concentrating on the best possible education for the moderately and severely impaired. (p. 97)

Sleeter (1986) offered a reinterpretation of the history of LD, suggesting that LD represented a social construction, rather than a special education classification, whose origins are in medicine. Sleeter begins by suggesting that we examine “how the raising of reading standards, coupled with social expectations that schools help America’s cold war effort and also sort students for future work roles in a stratified economy, led to the creation of learning disabilities” (p. 48). School failure, particularly in reading, led to students being divided into four categories (slow learner, mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, culturally deprived) and, by the late 1960s, the new category of learning disabilities. Sleeter then suggests that LD classes were initially populated by a select group since classes were overwhelmingly white and middle class during LD’s first 10 years. Sleeter goes on to say that
The learning disabilities category probably was not consciously established just for white middle class children, even though it was populated by them. It was established for children who, given the prevailing categories used to describe failing children, did not seem to fit any other category. Since most educators explained the failures of children of color and lower socioeconomic backgrounds with reference to the other four categories, such children tended not to have been placed in LD classes. White middle class parents and educators who saw their failing children as different from poor or minority children pressed for the creation and use of this category. (p. 50)

Marxist Views of LD: A Critique

Marxist analyses have thus examined the foundation of the LD field and have offered radically different interpretations of its development and purpose. In reviewing these analyses, it is impossible not to think that one has gone straight through the Looking Glass and into the land of Jabberwocky. There is a permeating unreality to these analyses that bears little resemblance to any LD that was known then or is known now. The unremittingly racist, exclusivist, and undemocratic trends assumed in these basic class-conflict perspectives about LD are red herrings that cloud rational argument and result in a warping of reality. Actuality is pushed aside in favor of a Byzantine mixture of ulterior motives and sinister plots, but such conspiracy theories usually collapse under the weight of their own implausibility, and these are no exception.

Each of the analyses presented ignores historical reality surrounding LD. They dismiss as irrelevant and immaterial facts that demonstrate, for example, the original medical etiologies of dyslexia, which place LD in the realm of biophysical phenomena. The people and events of the past pose an inconvenience when you attempt to place LD only within a 30-year framework; the result is a distorting of reality and a failure to appreciate the true origins of a complex phenomenon.

The limited historical framework presented in Marxist analyses (e.g., Sleeter) is necessary in order to emphasize the villainous effects of school reform. Because school reform is always associated with raising standards, it is probable that raised standards will result in a greater number of below-average students, but the real motivation is to enhance the abilities of all students in order to improve schools and society at large. The distortions about the purpose of school reform is necessary for the Marxist egalitarian fallacy: the assumption that all students should perform at the same level and that the provision of equal opportunity is somehow unjust. Marxist interpretations generally believe students are in no way responsible for their own achievement. Consequently, achievement is decried and performance as a measure of merit is derided as discriminatory, but the real discrimination is against students exhibiting the necessary ability and motivation rather than those students who could not keep up.

The Marxist analyses also fail to recognize the reality of each special education category. Be it MR, E/B, or LD, each has a history and a primary focus (e.g., below-average IQ, abnormal behavior, neurologically based processing problems) that represent authentic realities and not simply policy conveniences. Through some tortured logic, special education categories are assumed, in Marxist analyses, to represent classifications created specifically to deal with failure not related to the primary handicap but rather the circumstances surrounding its social and economic function. Thus, LD is for white, middle-class students while MR and E/B are for minority and low-SES students.

Sleeter (1986), for example, based this assumption on early literature (prior to 1975) and an analysis of subject descriptions in special education journals published between 1963 and 1973. Although this is viewed as clear evidence of the specter of discrimination, it should be neither alarming nor surprising if two pertinent facts are not ignored. The first is the exclusion clause found in LD definitions from their beginning. Eliminated from LD consideration were students whose learning problems are primarily the result of "environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage." The exclusion clause was a legitimate means of establishing the LD category by delineating boundaries about what the concept was not, and not a means for deliberately discriminating against certain groups. Discrimination would be a problem if there were no alternative arrangements for students excluded, and this points to the second fact that has been ignored.

Students who are environmentally, culturally, or economically disadvantaged receive a range of
services from preschool to college years. These programs were also being developed during the 1960s, the same time that LD was beginning as a category of special education. With the initiation of compensatory education programs to serve a different population of students, is it alarming or surprising that the new LD category would include mostly white, middle-class children? While LD was being established, there was an almost parallel development of programs for students who had previously been classified because their school failure was the result of extra-school factors. As part of the development process, LD excluded students meeting criteria for established categories (MR and E/BD), as well as students who would be provided service through these newly created compensatory education programs. With all programs aimed at enhancing school success, the only reasons for the Marxists’ distress must reside in the politics of envy. But might we not find discomfort in the fact that compensatory education programs are populated primarily by minority and low-SES children, given the benefits accruing from an early start and enrichment activities? Of course we are not discomforted, because we do not see a conspiracy at every turn, and possess a reality-based understanding of the purposes and assumptions behind program development.

Thus, Marxist analyses fail to enhance our understanding of LD in any meaningful fashion. The failure to recognize the reality of the LD condition, the fanciful distortions of history, and the application of all sorts of “theories” make for these Marxist distortions regarding LD. They do, however, demonstrate the significant influence of ideology on thinking in the LD field, especially when a field becomes highly politicized. Politics, as discussed, represents the force required to establish and to develop a field through legislative action and usually surrounds a single voice with respect to ideas. Once established, however, an entity is likely to become politicized, meaning that many different voices are heard, and policy is likely to change because of the influence of different social and economic motives and goals. These policy changes may bring conflict, and we believe many of the problems faced by the LD field are the result of its politicization rather than its original politics. Under such circumstances, the LD concept is likely to be viewed differently, and this politicization becomes fertile ground for application of Marxist ideology. The fallacy, however, is that the politicization of the LD field is viewed as the original state with no concern for the initial politics. Thus, there is a failure to distinguish between means (i.e., politics) and ends (i.e., politicization), which means that Marxists’ arguments are logically incorrect since they affirm the means from the ends.

“The Learning Mystique”: A “Softer” Marxism

The three Marxist analyses presented above represent the most egregious examples of applying a failed ideology to LD. There are, however, less polemical but no less dangerous distortions that, nevertheless, reach the same conclusion: LD is best viewed as solely a social construction. The prime example of this genre is the influential and popularized “The learning mystique: A critical look at ‘learning disabilities’” by Gerald Coles. Coles (1987) began by exploring the roots of the LD field, particularly the influence of Hinshelwood and the study of dyslexia (congenital word-blindness). It was suggested that the foundation of the field provides solely a neurological interpretation of LD and a biological determination where all cases are reduced to biophysical explanations. The analysis went on to explore perceptual, memory, attention, and linguistic research, but all areas were found wanting because of methodological and conceptual problems. Coles then discussed drugs, genetics, and gender with respect to LD, but again, all were found wanting. In summary, Coles concluded that Hinshelwood’s spirit is pervasive, biological reductionism abounds, all but biological explanations are disregarded, causation is confused with correlation, logic is frequently contorted, circular reasoning is prevalent, statistics, numbers, and other data are manipulated to demonstrate ‘proof,’ convenient explanations are substituted for complex analyses, bias constantly skews conclusions, and at times calculated distortions appear to underlie ‘findings.’ (p. 132)

In place of biological determinism, Coles (1987) provided a social interpretation of LD through an “interactivity” theory of LD that combines the concepts of interaction and activity. It is described as follows

Interaction emphasizes processes, relationships, and transformation, but insufficiently denotes activity. Activity emphasizes events and active persons, including the makeup of persons (such as neurology, language and reading abilities, motivation), but insufficient-
ly denotes interaction. Interactivity, in combining the concepts, denotes the numerous and complex activities and interactions that comprise the creation, sustenance, remediation and prevention of learning disabilities.

(p. 140)

Interactivity is not simply an environmental interpretation of LD where external influences affect an individual, rather it "involves active persons who are affected and changed by and in turn affect and change circumstances... [through] broad social, economic, political, and cultural influences, which are not always immediately apparent, but are fundamental to the creation or prevention of LD" (p. 140). The influence of family factors, schools, and educational factors in producing interactivity resulting in LD are reviewed, and a number of scenarios leading to LD are described.

Although less egregious in tone and scholarship than the earlier cited Marxist analyses, Coles (1987) is also in left field because of the assumption that "systemic, economic, social, and cultural conditions are the principle influences contributing to learning failure" (p. 209). Any mention of a biophysical formulation of LD is viewed as "blaming the victim," because "they serve to misdirect attention from the need for fundamental social changes [and] 'encourage' individuals and groups to accept and make the best of their destiny" (p. 25). With the one-sided view of LD proposed, it is little wonder that Coles (1987), in a chapter entitled "Reconsidering Neurology," posed a view of neurological difference and dysfunction strikingly similar to the "sociogenic brain damage" discussed by Carrier (1986), as evidenced in the assertion that "both brain difference and brain dysfunction are created within dysfunctional social relationships and activity" (p. 188). Finally, Coles called for partisanship about LD and its foundation.

Partisanship is required because the interests of both children and the professionals who work with them are not in harmony with the interests represented by the structural conditions in which learning failure arises. (p. 211)

Of course, these evil interests are conservative groups (e.g., Heritage Foundation), who seek to maintain the status quo for purposes of social reproduction, and whose polices are "vehicles in perpetuating inequality in schools and elsewhere. This partisanship on the side of educational inequality mandates that we take up a partisanship to eliminate educational inequality" (p. 212).

The most distressing aspect of Coles' (1987) analysis is the way it captured the public's imagination. The book was favorably reviewed in the popular press (e.g., The New York Times Review of Books, The Los Angeles Times) where Coles was seen as an idealistic reformer like H. Kohl, S. Kozol, and C. Silberman. Rather than idealistic, this tradition is better termed Marxist and suffers from far more basic difficulties.

Within the professional LD literature, Coles' analysis was given center stage; the Journal of Learning Disabilities devoted almost an entire issue to "The learning mystique" (see Adelman, 1989). Seven reactions to the book were solicited that included both favorable and unfavorable responses, which appeared to reflect not only scientific views but also ideological differences. For example, the favorable responses were from those who endorse the "interactional" or "ecological" perspective for LD. The more critical pieces emphasized the positive contributions of neurological, neuropsychological, genetic, and linguistic research and the ways in which they have enhanced our understanding of LD.

The difficulty with Coles' position is the intransigent resistance to accept scientific evidence of biophysical influences for LD. There are harsh critiques about the theoretical and methodological approaches used in such research that require it to be replaced by a unidimensional view that insists "LD must develop into a critical field, to examine and contest the social organizations, power, practices, and ideology that shape the conditions for educational failure" (Coles, 1987, p. 209). A good deal of sophisticated research was cast aside, and LD was placed within the same context as poverty, racial inequality, gender bias, and any other social ill that views LD solely as the result of sociopolitical struggle. The basis for such views was formed in Soviet psychology, which shows an unquestioned acceptance of sociopolitical influences. The role of the social environment does not need to be proved and conditions like LD are viewed as developing solely within interactive social relationships (see Wozniak, 1975). Such views were heartily endorsed by Coles (1982, 1983) in earlier writings even though they were roundly criticized (see Doehring, 1982; Goldberg, 1982).
The ideological views of LD presented above possess two fundamental problems. The first is a unidimensional view suggesting the importance of only sociopolitical influences and a complete rejection of most if not all biophysical influences, while the second is a resistance to accept even validated scientific evidence. Ideological analyses of problems result in ideological solutions to those problems. The proposed solutions are solely political in character and usually require nothing less than a revolutionary restructuring of present society. The proposed solutions are simplistic because they fail to recognize the reality (and complexity) of phenomena and are dangerous because they emphasize egalitarian fantasies that serve only to exacerbate existing relations. The ideological theories are to be adopted without criticism or question (presumably because they are "good" and "just"), but are quite scanty with respect to details. This situation creates little consternation as suggested by Coles (1987) in discussing his interactivity theory.

When we abandon an explanation that for decades has been the primary formulation for research, an alternative theory will almost certainly carry limited evidence, at least initially. This limitation is almost a given in the progress toward acceptance of theories of greater explanatory promise than those older but still inadequate ones that have received the most empirical attention. However, evidential limitations alone should not prevent the adoption of a new working theory. (pp. 137-138)

Other apologists weighed in with equal disdain for decades of scientific inquiry. Miller (1990), for example, under the guise of presenting an even-handed view, suggested that Coles' analysis is similar to those who have argued against the hereditarian view of IQ because "the diagnosis of learning disabled, like the hereditarian theory of IQ, has served as a rationalization for discriminatory and unjust social practices" (p. 88). Miller appeared to accept uncritically the view expressed by Coles that the real reason that children function poorly usually is not that anything is wrong with the children, but, rather because of injustices in the school system and in society. He feels that the biological explanation of their learning problems is a form of blaming the victim. Its purpose is to conceal the fact that they are not receiving the same opportunities as the children that the school system generally favors. (p. 87)

By suggesting that Coles has written "a detailed, comprehensive, and well-reasoned critique of the most fundamental axioms of the LD field" (Miller, 1990, p. 90), the Marxist underpinnings of the analysis are ignored, and it is taken for granted that the LD problem is one "stemming not only from the way our educational system works but also from the way our society, culture, and economic system works" (p. 89). Of course, "the Devil is in the details" and like most Marxist analyses it is less than satisfactory with respect to the actual dynamics of change. But Miller (1990) apologized by suggesting the real problem is not that Coles is one-sided or dogmatic—he is neither of these—but rather that his ideas, although interesting, provocative, and suggestive (at least as they presently are formulated), remain too loose and abstract to be useful to most researchers and practitioners who work with children with LD. (p. 88)

In fact, Coles' analysis is indeed one-sided and dogmatic. Miller's suggestion that the problem resides only in the theory being too loose and abstract is nonsense. His assumption that the reason for this lack of theory development is Coles' recognition that most LD professionals are likely to have difficulty understanding his central concept, "interactivity" (p. 88), is outrageous, as is the suggestion that Coles' thinking is viewed as "too radical to be accepted by most members of a middle class profession" (p. 86).

The Marxist analyses possess little merit for an enhanced understanding of LD. The idea that large-scale social influences result in a discrete condition like LD lacks conceptual clarity. This is not to suggest, however, that social forces have no bearing on LD. The biophysical foundations of LD take form in a social context. The real question becomes one of proportion, and the proper response is not either-or but how much biophysical and how much social influence. This sort of nature-nurture debate has been a central focus in discussions about the nature of intelligence, and it is generally accepted that IQ is a product of both heredity and environment. The question about how much of each remains open to debate, but it
would behoove the LD field to begin serious discussion about its own nature-nurture controversy. This question has not been a central focus and, in this vacuum, Marxist analyses have filled the void. Consequently, the dominant view of LD sees it as a social construction with no credence given to any biophysical foundation. Such a view appears validated when large-scale samples of students with LD are examined and no evidence of any biophysical manifestations is found. The difficulty, however, is that we can have little confidence in the populations studied; the long-existing failure to provide an agreed-upon formal and operational definition of LD makes any sample suspect and limits our ability to label students “truly” LD. Under these circumstances, the social constructivist view appears validated but, in reality, creates only a lamentable Catch-22. This is why the scientific side of LD must be reaffirmed and a better balance introduced into ideological discussions about LD.

POLITICS AS PHILOSOPHY
Philosophical Tensions in LD

Process training. While ideology is concerned with world news and large-scale influences in social structure, political philosophy is more narrowly focused and attempts to provide an analytic method for particular problems. Philosophy thus holds a middle ground between the massed action associated with advocacy and social goal structure and setting associated with ideology. The LD field has been witness to many philosophical debates that represent basic political differences. The following section examines these philosophical debates and their influence on the LD field.

Many of the philosophical debates in LD have surrounded issues about assessment and intervention. While the ideological debates in LD have examined the origins and development of the field, philosophical debates have often focused on the best means of treating students with LD. As an example, the early years of LD saw an emphasis on process training; the idea that intact basic psychological processes were required for adequate cognitive performance and, in turn, academic learning. The LD concept suggested that these impaired processes were the source of learning difficulties. For example, individual visual- or auditory-perceptual skills, the ability to integrate visual and auditory information, or the ability to integrate perceptual and motor skills might be impaired. Regardless of the process deficit postulated, training for the impaired process was the primary focus of intervention and took precedence over academic instruction, since it was assumed that efficient learning could only be achieved if all processes were intact and functioning normally. The process-training idea was pervasive and probably attributable to early pioneers in the LD field (e.g., Kirk, Cruickshank, Kephart, Frostig, Getman, Barsch), who provided process interpretations of LD and accompanying remediation programs.

The first dissent with respect to process training appeared in philosophical attacks (see Mann, 1979), which were followed by research suggesting that major process-training approaches were not effective in improving academic, cognitive, or even process skills. Within the context of the time, the negative evaluations of process training placed much at stake with respect to professional standing and vested interests in programs and materials. The professional debate in the research literature soon extended to professional organizations with respect to what they would advocate and who they would endorse. The professional meetings became political battlegrounds and, as suggested by Hammill (1993),

The controversy polarized the field, and most professionals more or less identified with the process orientation or with direct instruction. The political center of the learning disabilities movement practically dissolved in the mid-1970s. As one might expect under those conditions, the professional climate at that time was acrimonious and often vituperative. (p. 303)

Organizational structure and function. The polarization was so complete that it led to a reorganization of principal LD organizations that altered the basic professional and political character of the field. In 1968, a Division for Children with Learning Disabilities was formed within the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the major professional organization in special education. This became the primary battleground and, in 1982, an anti-process faction forced a vote that resulted in the Division becoming disassociated from CEC. This group elected to become an independent association known as the Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD). Within CEC, a new Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD) was
organized primarily by remaining members who did not share the same degree of anti-process sentiment. Thus, two distinct organizations were created based on basic philosophical differences about the nature of LD and the most appropriate forms of intervention. The philosophical schism has never been bridged, and the two groups remain disparate factions with different orientations, journals, and methodologies regarding LD.

Basic philosophical differences have also created tensions between LD organizations in the form of disputes about their purpose. For example, the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA) was the first LD organization, founded in 1963 under the name Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. It is largely a parent group founded for the purpose of promoting LD programs and services. As such, advocacy is its central mission and, at times, this purpose overshadows attempts to understand the condition in question. The primary focus of its activity is on developing and instituting programs and services for students with LD. This activity, however, proceeds as if a clear and unencumbered view of LD exists that furnishes an agreed-upon definition and conceptualization. In many respects, understanding LD is a secondary concern, since the primary aim is on providing service to those who need assistance.

Politically this means that there is a continuing call for more LD programs and services, and even a cursory view of the numbers suggests that this political action has been enormously successful. At the same time, however, there is increasing debate about the question: What is LD? With this question remaining unanswered, there is an ever-increasing possibility of misclassification. At some point, political reality will demand more accountability and the unfettered proliferation of LD programs and services will end abruptly. Such an end will damage the LD field because of the increased probability of not providing service to a student who really requires such service. If a greater balance could be achieved between helping and understanding, the inevitable retrenchment in LD programs and services might be achieved in a far more rational manner. The difficulty, however, is that politics is usually most successful when based on trendy and fashionable issues. Unfortunately, understanding LD is not nearly as chic as helping students with LD. While this view continues, the field appears to be doing well and groups like LDA are viewed as positive and committed voices. But, at some point, they may collapse under the weight of justification.

The differences among LD organizations raise an interesting question: Who speaks for the LD field? In fact, there are many voices in the LD field, and it is difficult to identify a single dominant entity. The field is structured by a variety of organizations with differing views, which results in a fractionated picture of LD. In contrast, for example, the MR field has long had a single dominant organization in the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR). Although many different professional groups (e.g., medicine, education, psychology, parents) can be identified, the organization speaks with a single voice that ultimately makes it more powerful. For example, the changes in MR definition over the years have had immediate impact because when AAMR speaks, the field listens. No such statement can be made about LD; when LDA, CLD, or DLD speaks, the ones listening are primarily their own members. Thus, their messages have limited impact, and that is the reason why LD organizations have had limited influence on the way the field behaves. In many respects, there is a political vacuum in the LD field that is filled at various times by various organizations for various reasons, not usually either rational or logical.

The lack of a single voice in the LD field has periodically led to conflict between LD and allied fields. For example, not long after its official recognition, the LD field found itself in debate about the roles and responsibilities of LD and reading disability (RD) specialists. A symposium in The Journal of Special Education (see Wiederholt, 1975) examined the issue with respect to four areas.

First, there is some debate about whether or not the population of pupils served by these two groups differs in any significant respect. Second, many question whether any significant differences exist between the groups' theoretical approaches to etiology and treatment. Third, does professional preparation differ in any significant respect for remedial education and learning disabilities? Finally, many educators maintain that the functions of the two groups do not significantly differ in the schools. (p. 117)

A review of the papers in both LD and reading journals suggests that the debate, in reality, had little substance, and that the issue was primarily political in the sense of being about territorial concerns and competition for clients. A variety of
“straw men” were created with respect to definition, identification, intervention, and certification, but the real issue was about responsibility for this new and growing population that required some form of intervention. The International Reading Association (IRA), as the single voice of the reading field, passed a series of resolutions demanding political action seeking IRA-guided certification for reading-language-learning problems through dual endorsement that would certify individuals as specialists in both reading-language disorders and learning disabilities.

In reaction, it was possible to read the headline, “Does this mean that IRA wants LD jobs?,” and the suggestion that “the entire resolution still stands as an unabashed, self-serving attempt to water down the nature and importance of LD services in order to enhance the position of the reading discipline” (Lane, 1976, p. 10). The dilemma, however, was found in the disparate nature of the LD responses; they were all sound analyses but lacked the impact found in the single and focused statement from the IRA. Thus, this represents a prime example of where the lack of a single voice worked against the LD field. The IRA was able to present a more politically savvy response while the LD field, with no single voice, could only muster what appeared to be petulant and negative responses in the face of competition. A more unified response resulting in a more coordinated and more focused analysis would have better served the LD field, but unfortunately there was no single voice that could bring a more politically powerful message to bear on the problem.

Philosophical arguments about LD interventions have not abated. The initial debate surrounded issues about indirect versus direct instruction. The process orientation was eventually replaced by a more behaviorally oriented approach that emphasized direct instruction (e.g., Distar) as well as concepts such as task analysis, positive reinforcement, and criterion-referenced measurement to improve academic performance. It was evident, by the mid-1970s, that the process approach to LD intervention was waning, but also evident was the realization that behavioral approaches were not as successful as hoped because of associated problems of maintenance and generalization. In an effort to focus more on how a student learns than what is learned, methods derived from cognitive psychology and information-processing research became popular during the 1980s. The assumption that students with LD possessed performance rather than ability problems, particularly in their inactivity surrounding learning (see Torgesen, 1977), led to procedures based on the development of cognitive and learning strategies. These metacognitive interventions were assumed to teach students with LD “how to learn,” which subsequently improves their acquisition and retention of academic information. Again, however, problems of maintenance and generalization were noted, and the LD field still faced a philosophical dilemma over the most effective form of intervention.

The Reductionist and Newtonian Mechanistic Paradigms

During the late 1980s, a new interpretation began to emerge that possessed significant political implications for the LD field. Poplin (1988a) argued that all models presently identified with LD intervention suffered from reductionist tendencies that results in the belief:

a) that learning disabilities can be reduced so as to allow definition of a single verifiable entity (or set of entities),
b) that the teaching/learning process is most effective when most reduced (e.g., controlled, focused, and segmented), and
c) that the reduction of educational services is beneficial. (p. 398)

These reductionistic tendencies are the reason for the failure of present teaching methodologies to produce unequivocal positive outcomes. Poplin (1988a) explained that it is my belief that the reductionistic nature of our methodologies actually creates the generalization and maintenance problems in the first place, and the application of more of the same reduction simply compounds the problem. (p. 394)

In a similar analysis, Heshusius (1989) riled against the predominant “Newtonian mechanistic paradigm” found in LD. Heshusius stated that Accounts of the Newtonian mechanistic paradigm point to the belief in simplicity as the foundation of the paradigm. All complexity is to be broken down into components; translated into practice, this leads to, for instance, task analysis and isolated skill training. The whole is understood by understanding the components as logically and sequentially arranged—assumptions that lead to mastery learning, programmed materials, and behavioral objectives. Thus, causality, prediction,
certainty, and control become inherently possible, leading to predictive instruments, diagnostic testing, and diagnostic/prescriptive teaching. (p. 404)

The basic evil is reductionism, which has been promulgated by present LD theories and only serves to reinforce basic reductionistic tendencies. A major problem is seen in the failure to understand the difference between theory and paradigm. Heshusius (1989) attempted to instruct us on the differences, but the analysis is less than convincing as evidenced in the following conclusion.

The contemporary turbulence and ferment that within the constraints of a mechanistic paradigm are seen as fuzziness, chaos, and anti-science, from the vantage point of a conscious and close examination of the paradigmatic boundaries themselves contain the roots and the information needed to move into the articulation of alternative paradigm thinking. To do so, much of what is sacred needs to be relinquished. (p. 408)

A healthy dose of victimology unfortunately appears to be introduced by Heshusius' suggestion that "accusations of fuzziness, mere intuition, and being anti-science are quickly leveled against those who are engaged in the formulation of non-mechanistic thought" (1989, p. 408). The real foundations for such anti-mechanistic thought is revealed, however, when Heshusius discussed the theoretical reorientations necessary to replace the mechanistic paradigm. When theories about interaction, resistance, and empowerment are discussed, it becomes evident that the anti-reductionist camp appears to have its ideological roots in the Marxist educational ideology discussed earlier.

The Holistic Paradigm as Intervention Alternative

Whether termed natural science (Fisher & Rizzo, 1974), rational/technical (Iano, 1986), reductionist (Poplin, 1988a), or Newtonian mechanistic (Heshusius, 1989), this paradigm, with its search for objectivity and certainty, has wreaked havoc on special education diagnoses and classification as well as the deficit-driven "boredom that flows from mechanistically informed instruction" (Heshusius, 1989, p. 406). What then is the alternative paradigm that will deliver us from evil? The answer is found in the holistic paradigm (Heshusius, 1982, 1989; Poplin, 1988b). In essence, Holistic assumptions reverse the reductionistic/mechanistic position: It is not the case that the dynamics of the whole can be understood from the properties of the parts, but rather, that the properties of the parts can only be understood from the dynamics of the whole. The whole is both different from and more than the sum of its parts. Knowledge of ‘parts’ does not lead to knowledge of the whole. There are no fixed and reliable linkages among the parts. (Heshusius, 1989, p. 412)

Poplin (1988b) provided principles and examples of a holistic teaching/learning process (with illustrations that are more reminiscent of the tornadoes that periodically grace the Kansas prairie where Dr. Poplin spent the early days of her career than of the teaching/learning process), concluding that

From a holistic/constructionist perspective, knowledge of disability, behavior management, sequentially ordered commercial materials, and tightly controlled direct instruction pale in comparison to the knowledge of the student and the knowledge of how to design meaningful experiences around who they are rather than who they are not. (p. 415)

Although there is a call for significant change, the holistic/nonmechanistic paradigm proposed appears to lack substance in the form of tangible principles rather than simply a change in philosophical perspective. This does not appear troubling to holists since

While holism is certainly not ‘just around the corner,’ not in our practice and not in mainstream academic, its influence is slowly but steadily becoming visible. . . . Much still needs to be further explored and articulated. . . . It may well take longer for a holistic paradigm to do so, because it acknowledges understanding complexity, rather than reduction to simplicity, as its major task. (Heshusius, 1989, p. 413)

It appears that the LD field is far too easily seduced by the holistic/nonmechanistic paradigm. But mere claims about it being “good” and “better” are not sufficient to bring about the significant and substantial change being called for. Warner (1993), for example, examined the holistic position from the perspective of critical realism and concluded that holists have not yet developed an adequate concept of the intransitive objects of scientific knowledge,
or of our relationship, as knowers, to those objects. Either the possibility of objectivity and progress in understanding the human world (and thus, learning disabilities) is rejected altogether, or internal contradictions appear with respect to this question in the writings of the holists. . . . Holists seem to lean in the direction of conventionalist, subjectivist, or interpretivist notions of truth. Critical realists, while agreeing that all meaning is socially constructed and historically contingent, uphold the possibility that humans can, over time, develop knowledge of the natural and social worlds that is increasingly isomorphic with those worlds, and has increasing explanatory power in open systems. (pp. 321-322)

The Marxist Basis of Holism: Blurred Lenses

Instead of providing more tangible suggestions about the ways holism might become integrated into LD thought, the most recent publications have an even more ethereal quality (see Poplin, 1995, and the following special series in the Journal of Learning Disabilities). This New Age wisdom seems also to touch on familiar Marxist ideology, where the articles are said to describe “the problems we face as accomplices in creating and maintaining bureaucracies and other structures that contribute to the current injustices of “ableism”, racism, and classism (Poplin, 1995, p. 393). If one is guilt-ridden enough to accept the role of “accomplice” in creating presumed injustices, then the answers are found in critical pedagogy where we must see ourselves as liberatory educators, as teachers seeking to provide students ways to free themselves from worldly limitations and to awaken their full potential. Liberatory or critical education asks us to carefully examine how our assumptions and practices in learning disabilities might be oppressing the very students we seek to serve. (Poplin, 1995, p. 394)

The call is for a much more encompassing “sociocultural constructionism,” for example, that clearly possesses a Marxist foundation. Thus, we have a philosophical dispute about the best paradigmatic approach for LD that has slid down a slippery slope into ideology where it is far more difficult to resolve controversies in a rational manner.

Philosophical Foundation of LD: Myth or Reality?

The political philosophy dominating the LD field appears to include entrenched ideas that have become conventional wisdom even though based on questionable assumptions. The most prominent example is the idea of LD as myth, where “it should by now be clear that there is no such thing as learning disability” (McKnight, 1982, p. 352). The category of LD is viewed as a convenience created by special education; “LD was a well-intentioned but ill-conceived movement that has run amok and is placing millions of youngsters in a disabling trajectory toward failure and low self-esteem from which there is little hope of escape” (Finlan, 1994, p. 8). The difficulties with LD are found in the negative effects of labeling, excessive testing with poor instruments, misguided interventions aimed at phantom deficits, and the general liabilities associated with special education. Much of Finlan’s (1994) work is marked by an anti-intellectual attitude represented in a trendier Marxism with a “softer” social interpretation of LD.

The basic problem is again a too-easy dismissal of many years of accumulated research that suggests the incontrovertible conclusion of the existence of a particular form of learning problem that has come to be termed LD. Klatt (1991), for example, termed LD a “questionable construct” and analyzed definitional components (e.g., LD as brain dysfunction, as a disorder, and as characterized by adequate cognition) in a pseudo scientific treatise. The primary difficulty with analyses like Klatt’s is that they are based on what LD has become. It is true that LD is marked by a wide assortment of difficulties, but almost all represent the effects of the way LD has come to be viewed. Most notable is the view that any learning problem can be termed LD. The Humean problem of induction has been writ large in the LD field. Originally, the term “specific” LD denoted a particular condition; the “specific” adjective was important for differentiating LD from more generalized forms of learning failure. However, social forces (e.g., advocacy, ideology) almost immediately broadened the parameters of LD to include a greater number of students who require special education but may not be LD. Thus, LD moved from a specific condition (“all LD include learning problems”) to a general condition (“all learning problems include LD”).

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The Past as Prologue

The Journal of Learning Disabilities, in its silver anniversary issue, published its inaugural article written by Ray Barsch in 1968. A prime issue was whether LD should be viewed as a disability category like auditory impairment or a concept where three populations have been included in the learning disabilities composite: (1) the brain-injured child where general learning characteristics exclude him from consideration among traditionally existing categories; (2) the “plain vanilla” child of the regular classroom whose learning problems are not readily defined by traditional explanations; and (3) the special child with a single disability (or even multiple disabilities) who does not learn as expected. There are yet others who must be included. (Barsch, 1992, p. 12)

Barsch argued for viewing LD as a concept, and the evidence in terms of numbers and the continuing debate about classification suggest that he won the argument. It is interesting that such an argument could occur when LD was just beginning its formal recognition. One could imagine that the intention was for LD to be a disability category with a circumscribed set of parameters. However, the irresistible desire to help all students experiencing difficulty in school almost immediately affected LD negatively and diverted attention from the task of explicating the categorical parameters. Barsch (1992), for example, suggested that LD “is a term to be applied to any learner who fails to benefit from an existing curriculum into which he has been placed” (p. 12). With such a definition, perhaps 50% of the school population would qualify as LD. It is difficult to imagine that this was the original intent, but it demonstrates the profound influence of social forces, especially advocacy, for students experiencing school difficulties. Barsch (1992) suggested that

Learning disabilities are to be found wherever there are learners. Narrow definition of a precise set of symptoms will inevitably lead to massive exclusion. The language of description must be formulated in learning terminology with no relationship to traditional labeling. Learning disabilities, as a label, constitute a concept for educational thought. To pursue a course of defining a category to be fitted, among other existing categories, constitutes an entrapment in traditional thought. To treat learning disabilities as a concept instead of a category represents an opportunity to consider an entirely new set of dimensions and parameters. (p. 12)

This statement captures all that is wrong with LD, both then and now. A resistance to viewing LD as a discrete condition was replaced by a desire to describe a broad “concept” for the purpose of including as many students as possible. The new LD concept was a more positive label and did not carry the same negative connotations as MR or E/BD. Consequently, stigma was minimal, outweighed by the benefits accrued from receiving special education. The benefits associated with LD had positive political ramifications but negative consequences for a scientific LD because of the accompanying movement away from enhancing the categorical structure. Scientific activity was not viewed as important; consequently, original conceptualizations about LD were “lost.” Replacing original views of LD was a vague and ill-defined concept of LD, which served the purpose of providing service to larger and larger numbers of students. Thus, a simple axiom captures the state of LD: the more you don’t know what you are talking about, the greater the number of students are likely to be served under the label about which you don’t know what you are talking about.

Enhancing the LD Concept: Replacing Myth with Reality

The inherent vagueness surrounding LD and the inability to stipulate definitive parameters result in the promulgation of LD as a myth. Research justification is found, for example, in the earlier cited IRLD studies (Ysseldyke et al., 1982) suggesting difficulties in differentiating LD and LA students (see earlier discussion). In a cogent analysis, Bateman (1992) suggested that caution should prevent us from concluding that children with learning disabilities cannot be diagnostically distinguished from others. The fact that many diagnosticians (perhaps psychometrician is a better word) do not distinguish learning disabilities from generic low performance does not mean it cannot be done. (p. 32)

Are efforts directed at examining ways by which the groups may be distinguished? The answer is no. Instead, writings suggest that LD is an “oversophisticated concept” (see Algazzine & Ysseldyke, 1983). In reality, LD is not nearly sophisticated enough, and it would behoove the
field to direct greater energies at explicating the nature of LD to better understand "what is being talked about."

If the reality of LD were reaffirmed, a statement like "LD is not some scientifically proven, hard-to-identify disease but a made-up category in which to place children" (Finlan, 1994, p. 7) would be shown to be the nonsense that it is. There is also the omnipresent and unidimensional view of LD, which considers only social forces; "LD is the product of the institutions in which the children must deal rather than something within the children themselves" (p. 151). Promulgating such an idea, however, requires the distortion of history. For example, Finlan stated that "LD was originally conceived as minimal brain dysfunction," but this statement ignores the earlier contribution of actual brain damage and its consequences in the evolution of LD (see Kavale & Forness, 1995). The minimal brain dysfunction (MBD) concept represents a behavioral interpretation of brain injury that has engendered much debate (Kavale & Forness, 1995). The point is that LD was not originally conceived as MBD, but the proper interpretation presents an unpleasant reality for Finlan that is simply ignored.

Should we attempt to enhance the LD concept and reaffirm its reality in the face of the significant erosion it has experienced? According to Finlan (1994), the answer is no, and "The consequences of the label are so severe, and the children labeled are so harmed that we must end this category quickly and forever" (p. 9). It would be interesting to see the reactions of those like Finlan if, in fact, LD was eliminated. Even within the quagmire of misclassification surrounding LD, there exists a core of students experiencing real problems in learning who require special education for amelioration. What would Finlan’s suggestion be for such students? To eliminate the LD category seems a poor choice whereas reaffirming and enhancing the concept is likely to pay greater dividends.

The basic problem with perpetuating the LD-as-myth idea is the undermining of the LD concept’s integrity. In a Popperian logic of science (see Popper, 1959, 1968), knowledge grows not by a process of proving concepts true but through their openness to refutation. A statement that is compatible with any evidence is not scientific; scientific statements are important because they rule out certain possibilities. Any statement that is insulated against refutation is metaphysical. Ignoring biophysical considerations while emphasizing social considerations (far more difficult to test through serious attempts at refutation) suggests that LD has become a metaphysical concept. It has become difficult to test and, when not open to criticism, a concept also loses its rationality. Thus, LD has attained the status of a metaphysical and irrational concept. Under such circumstances, it is easy to see "how anything goes."

**Posthumous Diagnosis: LD, Dead or Alive**

The failure to understand LD has resulted in sometimes ridiculous debate. Because LD has become increasingly widespread and familiar, the diagnosis is made almost effortlessly and has extended to historical figures who were presumably LD. Beginning with Thompson (1971), analyses about Albert Einstein, Thomas A. Edison, Woodrow Wilson, General Patton, August Rodin, William Butler Yeats, Hans Christian Andersen, and Leonardo da Vinci, among others, have been presented (see also Aaron, Phillips, & Larsen, 1988; Miner & Siegel, 1992). Although of historical interest, these case studies probably do more harm than good. How can you diagnose a condition in a person who is dead when such a diagnosis is problematic even in someone who is alive?

Adelman and Adelman (1987) analyzed five cases and demonstrated that the sources used contain little compelling medical and psychological data. When combined with the lack of direct assessment data, these posthumous diagnoses are less than convincing. In defense, arguments are made that posthumous diagnoses are contingent upon the definition of LD accepted (see Aaron et al., 1988). A dysfunction definition predicated on neurologic and physiologic symptoms presents difficulty while a difference definition where LD is viewed as representing the lower end of the normal range of human variation is viewed as more compatible with posthumous diagnosis.

The entire debate about posthumous diagnosis of LD appears a bit absurd when the fact of the matter is that we have no idea what we are talking about when it comes to LD. What is not in doubt is that the historical figures in question possessed school difficulties, but it is hardly proper to term such difficulties LD. The vague and imprecise nature of LD creates many problems related to misclassification in those who are
alive, so it is not surprising that the problems are magnified in those who died before the term was even formalized.

Although these posthumous analyses produce only a revisionist pseudohistory, they do serve a political purpose and that is the reason why they are given credence. Adelman and Adelman (1987) suggested that the process "stems from a long and honorable tradition among advocates for persons with handicaps who try to inspire their constituencies by pointing to eminent people who have overcome disabilities. The use of well-known names also has helped draw attention to the problem and provides a vivid image to aid in fund-raising appeals" (p. 278). Miner and Siegel (1992), in their case study of W. B. Yeats, concluded that "We hope that children, parents, and teachers working with their problem will be inspired by the brilliant accomplishments of someone who may have had dyslexia. Not all individuals with dyslexia need aspire to poetic greatness; but the possibility of achieving more than just a level of functional literacy may be well within their grasp" (p. 375).

Forget problems related to the LD concept, forget problems related to diagnosis and classification of LD, but don’t forget that you do not necessarily have to fail in school because you are unhappy, unmotivated, immature, or befallen by any other potential problem except LD. The indiscriminate labeling of LD only serves to undermine the integrity of the field and is seen in advertisements stating, "Even Einstein had a learning disability." A real problem that imposes real constraints on an individual becomes trivialized under such circumstances and the real student with LD becomes short-changed in the process.

Studying LD: Basic and Applied Research

The inherent difficulties in posthumous diagnosis are related primarily to a failure to understand LD. This remains a continuing difficulty, but there seems to be a lack of will to do anything about it. In fact, suggestions about enhancing the LD concept are often met with hostility. Swanson (1988) presented a penetrating analysis of the role of basic research in developing a meta-theory of LD that would provide a rational vehicle for viewing events in the LD domain: "Theory, in turn, allows for the development of a genuine science, prevents the practice of data collection that does not contribute to an understanding of events, organizes existing studies, and reveals the complexity of simple events" (p. 206). The position offered by Swanson appears completely rational and provides a means for LD to become a science in the sense of predicting, controlling, describing, and explaining a phenomenon. Yet, in many commentaries following Swanson’s paper, his position was not supported.

The commentaries questioning Swanson’s view demonstrate an unhealthy anti-theoretical attitude driven by an applied research bias in LD. The only thing of importance is treating a student with LD; any understanding of the problems manifested by a student with LD is secondary. Swanson (1988) pointed out the danger of an applied research bias, most notably the failure to integrate theory and practice. Additionally, the negative roles of intentions, pluralism, and consumerism were noted as practices that make LD research directed by social consensus rather than theory.

The commentaries questioning Swanson’s (1988) position present superficial arguments that fail to recognize the importance of theory in the scientific development of LD. The discussions instead centered on the meaning of paradigm, the fact that theory is "nice" but the field cannot wait for its development, that LD is not a unitary construct ("there are many different LDs"), and anecdotal accounts of individual research ("My research...") that itself is filled with inconsistencies and contradictions.

In essence, the arguments against Swanson’s position were not compelling and appear to reflect the trendy and fashionable political zeitgeist in LD that assumes there are no consequences as a result of not understanding LD ("After all, it is so complex") as long as services are provided. This “know-nothing” attitude works as long as resources are plentiful but becomes problematic when there is retrenchment of resources and decisions about who or who is not LD become more significant. Even an applied field needs an understanding provided by basic research in order to know “who you are talking about.”

Research about LD? The NICHD Research Centers

The continuing resistance to direct efforts to reach a comprehensive understanding of LD reinforces the mindset of LD as myth and perpetuates the assumption that LD is impossible to
define with any precision. The result is a lack of
to enhance the LD construct and an aban-
donment of LD as a primary focus. For exam-
ple, the National Institute of Child Health and
Human Development (NICHD), over the past
several years, has sponsored programmatic
research in LD in an effort to avoid the pitfalls
of “single-shot” research. A number of Learning
Disability Research Centers (LDRC) were estab-
lished to investigate various facets of LD (see
Lyon, 1995; Moats & Lyon, 1993). These
LDRC have reported a number of findings but,
in a majority of cases, one has to search for
findings related to LD. The samples studied
most usually include students with dyslexia or
ADHD. Where are the students with LD?

One of the basic themes of science is parsi-
mony embodied in an elegant simplicity of con-
venience and manageability in describing a phe-
nomenon. Does using students with dyslexia or
ADHD to explain LD make for parsimony?
According to the principle of ontological parsi-
mony (Occam’s Razor), if terms are equivalent
then all would not be necessary. One would
hope that dyslexia and ADHD are not viewed
as equivalent to LD. The recent trend to exam-
ine comorbidity among conditions is useful but
should not be taken to mean that they are inter-
changeable. It could be argued that dyslexia
(reading problems) and ADHD (attention prob-
lems) are symptoms of LD and not LD itself.
What are we to make of a student with LD who
possesses neither a reading nor an attention
problem? What are we to do with the many stu-
dents with LD who possess both a reading and
a math problem? Obviously, the LDRC findings
do not generalize to these students but
nonetheless remain LD. It seems that LD is
more than a reading or attention problem.
Thus, the LDRC findings are significantly limit-
ed, and questions arise as to whether the mil-
ions of dollars spent on the research will pay
any dividends for the LD field.

An even more intriguing question is why the
LDRC investigators did not study LD but rather
dyslexia and ADHD. Surely, they could not
believe that either dyslexia or ADHD is better
defined than LD. Even a cursory examination of
the literature reveals debate about the definitions
dyslexia and ADHD, albeit not as public as
about LD. Discussions about the mythical quali-
ties of these entities can be found paralleling
those for LD. It appears, then, that we are not
dealing with better validated constructs that
might ultimately lead to an enhanced under-
standing of LD.

With no scientific reason for choosing dyslexia
and ADHD to study LD, political reasons may
explain the curious choice. The failure to achieve
consensus on the nature of LD and the continu-
ing problem of definition (see Kavale & Forness,
1997) has become a very public debate. As
Scruggs and Mastropieri (1988) suggested, much
of the criticism has been self-inflicted as well as
emanating from allied disciplines. The result of all
this debate is a political view of LD as a field that
can do little to help itself. Some 25 years after its
inception, LD is still debating the same issues
with no discernible resolution on the horizon.
This view partially explains the interest of allied
disciplines for LD since those in LD obviously
cannot help themselves. Thus, LD is viewed as a
field in disarray with little prospect of ever extri-
cating itself from its dilemma.

Given the politics of the situation, should we
spend millions of dollars in studying LD? Probably
not, but if we could circumvent the “LD problem”
by studying what could be pawned off as LD, then
we could probably fool most of the people. We
could make believe that these allied conditions
(which are actually symptoms) are really LD itself
since nobody really knows what LD is and then
disseminate findings about LD because they
emanate from a Learning Disability Research
Center (italics added). The findings, since they
apparently circumvent the LD problem, are
imbued with an immediate scientific credibility
but, in reality, add little to our understanding of
LD. The LDRC funded by NICHD is not money
well spent but represents a poor attempt to re-
establish credibility for the LD field.

Before such large-scale investigation of LD can
produce meaningful findings, a clear, unencum-
bered view of LD must be attained. Kavale and
Forness (1995) outlined a possible procedure for
overhauling the LD construct that begins with
foundation principles and ends with operational
criteria for diagnosis and classification. Over the
past year, the Iowa Department of Education has
initiated activities to enhance LD practice.
Realizing that the federal definition provides the
foundation but also realizing its inadequacies, a
task force was launched to outline a consensus
view on what LD is and then provide activities for
implementing that view in practice. The value of such an activity is that it synthesizes a priori the wisdom of a very capable group of professionals in answering the question, "What is LD?" This is quite a different approach from abandoning the LD construct in favor of presumably better concepts that, in reality, are not better understood but more politically acceptable. The LDRC should not be afraid to engage in activities that define clearly what LD is.

CONCLUSION
Politics is an integral part of the LD field. Whether in the form of advocacy, ideology, or philosophy, political considerations have been a dominant force. Because LD was partially a political creation, it is not surprising that politics should play a significant role in the formulation of policies. However, the difficulty is that politics has come to play the major (and sometimes only) role in directing activity in the LD field. For example, Hammill (1993) described the "LD movement," which implies a strong political character underlying activity. When politics is dominant, decision-making dynamics change, and advocacy, ideology, and philosophy come to the fore at the expense of the analytical, logical, and rational.

The major problem created is a failure to understand LD. As part of the dominant political character of LD, there appears to be a resistance to define LD with any precision. The ensuing vagueness leads to difficulty in answering the question, "What is LD?" but places limited constraints on practical activities. The result is a situation where the sheer volume of activity provides the appearance of knowing what we are talking about. But, in reality, there is limited conceptual understanding of LD. Thus, the LD field proceeds with little rhyme or reason, and politics replaces science in guiding activity. The consequences are found in no real advances in the theoretical foundation of LD that might otherwise lead to enhanced efforts at diagnosis, classification, and intervention, but only political advances manifested in advocacy (identifying greater numbers of students as having LD when there is no rational means of determining whether or not they are "truly" LD), ideology (Marxist interpretations about how an evil system is suppressing the goals and aspirations of poor and oppressed groups), and philosophy (New Age distortions that attempt to circumvent reality).

None of this is to place politics in a perjorative position; politics is integral to formulating real-world policies but must not be the primary consideration. There must be a scientific base that is essentially nonpolitical. From this objective and systematic base, politics can then play the role of producing a real-world perspective that, hopefully, results in logical and rational policy.

The LD field must strive to attain a better balance between politics and science. Science must not be viewed as some esoteric activity, but as the primary vehicle for understanding what it is that we are talking about. Just think how refreshing it would be if discussions about LD were predicated on a common understanding rather than assuming that everyone knows what LD is. The other advantage would be a reduction in the amount of variance explained by politics in decision-making. Presently, most of the variance is explained by politics that permits a wide swath of ideology and philosophy to enter the equation, which may deflect attention away from the primary object of interest (i.e., LD). It would behoove the LD field, therefore, to direct attention toward enhanced understanding of the LD concept and provide an unencumbered response to the question "What is LD?" By establishing a consensual view of LD, politics may be placed in proper perspective, and the LD field may become able to extricate itself from ceaseless debate and dissension that create a vacuum too often filled by political ideology and philosophy that only serves to exacerbate the situation.

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