

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The employment problems of individuals who are functionally illiterate or deficient in basic skills has recently become a policy concern in the Administration and in Congress. A related concern is that a substantial number of functionally illiterate or basic skills deficient persons may, in fact, be learning disabled. If a substantial proportion of persons in Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and other employment and training programs who have been identified as functionally illiterate are learning disabled, it may be necessary to reconsider programmatic approaches to assessment and training.

Since there are no current statistics on the learning disabled population in employment and training programs, estimates of the proportion of employment and training participants who might be learning disabled were developed in this study by extrapolating from what is known about: (a) persons who are functionally illiterate, and (b) persons who are learning disabled. In addition, this report includes a discussion of the current state of knowledge regarding assessing and training adults with learning disabilities.

WHAT PROPORTION OF INDIVIDUALS ELIGIBLE FOR EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS ARE LIKELY TO BE LEARNING DISABLED?

There is evidence of a high incidence of learning disabilities and functional illiteracy among the economically disadvantaged population. Depending on which of several definitions are used, 20 to 29 percent of economically-disadvantaged adults may be functionally illiterate. Adult basic education (ABE) is the only major program about which there is any information on the number of learning disabled participants: non-empirical studies suggest that between 50 and 80 percent of ABE students (generally reading below the fifth or seventh grade level) are probably learning disabled. Given this apparently high incidence of learning disabilities among "poor readers" and given the proportion of

participants in various programs who are known to have reading levels below the seventh grade level, it is estimated that approximately:

- o 15 to 23 percent of all JTPA Title IIA participants may be learning disabled (50 to 80 percent of those identified as reading below the seventh grade level), and
- o 25 to 40 percent of all adults on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) Program may be learning disabled.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ART FOR TESTING AND ASSESSING ADULTS IN ORDER TO IDENTIFY THE PRESENCE OF LEARNING DISABILITIES?

There are numerous tools available for identifying learning disabilities, ranging from informal checklists to more formal and comprehensive diagnostic packages.

Informal checklists are quick, inexpensive and can be administered by a lay person to preliminarily screen a person for the possible presence of a learning disability. Formal diagnostic procedures range from paper and pencil tests which take about an hour to complete and can be administered by a non-professional; to costly comprehensive batteries which can take several days to complete and must be conducted by specially-trained professionals. Caution must be taken to assure that assessments are conducted and interpreted correctly. This means that although counselors and staff in employment and training programs may be able to screen for learning disabilities, they should not conduct the in-depth assessments, but rather refer clients to professional clinicians for complete diagnosis of learning disabilities.

WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE ART WITH RESPECT TO PROVIDING BASIC AND OCCUPATIONAL SKILLS INSTRUCTION TO LEARNING DISABLED PERSONS?

In the educational field, there is a broad body of knowledge about teaching learning disabled persons. Much of the knowledge originated with efforts to teach learning disabled

children at the elementary and secondary level, but has recently been adapted for teaching learning disabled adults as well. Although there is very little published information about how to provide occupational skills training to learning disabled persons, many of the instructional techniques originally developed for children are now also being applied in the training setting. These techniques include (a) helping the individual to understand his/her disability and learn compensatory strategies that can be applied in school and at work to overcome the disability, and (b) using non-traditional instructional methods such as un-timed tests, verbal and video rather than written manuals, repetition and review, and one-on-one teaching.

Most of the written material on work-related training for adults with learning disabilities has been developed only recently, by the vocational rehabilitation community, in part because federal guidelines in the early 1980s required state and local vocational rehabilitation programs to include learning disabilities as a condition qualifying a person for services.

Informal discussions with a few JTPA administrators suggest that the JTPA system may not be specifically assessing for learning disabilities or designing training programs for this population, although it is likely that a large number of "poor reading" JTPA participants are learning disabled.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO ENSURE THAT LEARNING DISABLED PERSONS ELIGIBLE FOR EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAMS ARE PROPERLY SERVED?

The review conducted in this study suggests a few recommendations for both local program operators and national policy makers. The local level recommendations focus on ways programs can make modest changes given that a large number of their participants are evidently learning disabled. The national level recommendations focus on filling the existing gaps in knowledge.

At the local level:

- o Incorporate appropriate instructional strategies into job search training and pre-employability components. Since a large proportion of JTPA adults who are reading below the seventh grade level may be learning disabled, even if a program does not routinely screen for learning disabilities, it would make sense to integrate into group components some of the simpler instructional techniques (e.g., small groups, video and verbal material rather than just written manuals, verbal and untimed tests) that work well for learning disabled persons.
- o Combine basic skills instruction with functional occupational skill instruction. Learning disabled persons benefit from a training program that integrates basic education (e.g., reading and math) with applied functional skill development (e.g., clerical or machinist training). Such training can be done in a traditional classroom setting (e.g., including functional workplace applications in basic reading and math lessons), in a vocational training setting (e.g., teaching basic skills along with vocational training, adapting reading and math to the occupational training curriculum), or in a workplace setting on the job.
- o Avoid arbitrary referral of persons with low reading skills to possibly inappropriate remediation programs. Many JTPA and JOBS programs refer persons with low-reading levels to adult education programs. However, one reason for the high drop-out rate from traditional ABE programs may be that the classes are not designed to accommodate the learning disabled. It seems that ABE administrators are also becoming more aware of the problems of the learning disabled adult, but until specific ABE programs are developed, JTPA and JOBS programs should adopt some of the inexpensive quick screens to identify adults who may possibly be learning disabled and refer them to programs designed for that population (e.g., in-depth assessment and/or training programs for the learning disabled are offered through vocational rehabilitation and community college programs).

At the national level:

- o DOL officials should consider the establishment of an interagency workgroup on learning disabilities. The group could include representatives from JTPA, vocational rehabilitation, adult education, JOBS, and vocational education. The purpose of the workgroup would be to improve the quality of services to the adult learning-disabled population. A coordinated federal agency effort at sharing knowledge and experiences could encourage the development of integrated policy guidelines for the various programs, joint research, and technical assistance.
- o DOL should review the need for the a Departmental research and technical assistance agenda to examine the learning disabled population and current practices for serving them. including:
 - a. Research on the size and characteristics of the learning disabled population.
 - b. Studies to examine different employment-related problems and service needs for subgroups within the learning disabled population (e.g., older adults versus teenagers and young adults).

- c. Review of various assessment tools and development of a technical assistance package for use by program operators.
- d. Research on the current practices and extent of services for learning disabled adults by JTPA, JOBS, vocational rehabilitation, community colleges and other entities. Once more knowledge has been accumulated, it would be useful to conduct studies to (a) identify and document exemplary service models and (b) establish pilot or demonstration projects.