

Learning Disabilities Study #12
Learning Disabilities Association

By Mandy Fry
NAST 381A
1999

Learning Disabilities Study #12

By: Fry, M.

Keywords: marketing, plan, disabilities, learning disability, stakeholders, strategic plan, needs, volunteers, Learning Disabilities Association

Abstract:

The purpose of this project is to complete a study identifying the stakeholders and their issues and concerns about learning disabilities. This study would provide us with the information needed to develop a marketing plan which would be responsive to the needs of the various constituencies. It is anticipated that a study of this kind would include a review of the agency's strategic plan, interviews with selected Board members, community representatives, educators, and volunteers, a membership survey, and a questionnaire developed for visitors to the Centre. The results of the research would form the framework for a marketing plan.

INTRODUCTION

There were many reasons why it was important to do research at the Learning Disabilities Association of Peterborough (LDAP). Firstly, it allowed me to become involved in the community and aware of existing issues that relate to the general public. Also, in the beginning I learned that the general public finds it easy to ignore learning disabilities - one of the most common disabilities affecting children and adults, since it is non-visible.

I met with Janet Greene in early October, to discuss my roles and responsibilities and to learn what she needed research on. I then went to Thomas A. Stewart for six sessions on teaching learning disabled students about the myths and realities, relating to learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, and strategies for which they can become an effective self advocate. Since they were the subjects whom this project is trying to help, I prepared a brief interview for the students who were interested.

The research needed was to find a way to market services more effectively. I figured since I hope to be a future educator and there is a lack of teacher involvement with the LDAP, I wanted to learn why and how teachers could become more involved. So, I prepared a questionnaire for the guidance counselors and teachers who we worked with. Since they work directly with learning disabled students,

Learning Disabilities Study
" " Association
MAYOR FRY

#12

NAT 57 38119

1999

the collaboration of the services offered by Learning Disabilities Association with teachers, would be of great benefit to the learning disabled student.

WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

A learning disability is a disorder that affects an individual's ability to take in, retain and/or express information. The 'label' includes the group of students who do not fit neatly into the traditional categories of handicapped students. It is a broad term that covers a variety of possible causes, symptoms, treatments and outcomes. For this reason, and because the disorder is non-visible, it is often difficult to pinpoint the causes and provide services that receive the attention they deserve. It is important that the family does not dwell on the causes but rather move forward in finding ways to get the right help.

The problems faced by the learning disabled student are manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. Since such difficulties can impede learning, the student and everyone related to or working with him/her must understand that they need to receive and convey information in a manner that works best for that individual. People with learning disabilities have average to above average intelligence but often need resources and help to reach their full potential. They can compensate by seeking help through technical aids, learning strategies and peer support.

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a medical condition, which is characterized by difficulty in paying attention and impulsivity. There may also be hyperactivity. These symptoms must have been present before the age of seven. It is common for learning disabilities and ADHD to occur together.

THE INCIDENCE OF LEARNING DISABILITIES

Generally, it is accepted that the incidence of learning disabilities within the general population is 10%, with males outnumbering females by a ratio of four to one. This incidence rate, first used in the U.S. as the low end of the range, was confirmed and cited by a number of Canadian studies. These included the CELDIC report (Children with Emotional and Learning Disorders in Canada) in 1972 and a follow-up report of the Canadian Pediatric Society published in 1974. In 1989, Statistical Profile of Disabled Persons in Ontario, published by the Government of Ontario reported an incidence rate of 16%. The most recent figures available from the Ministry of Education report a total of 77,900 students within the schools of Ontario, who are formally identified as having a learning disability. Most of these statistics are based on the number of children and adolescents identified and are extrapolated to the adult population. It is interesting to note that a recent article in the New England Journal of Medicine cited the incidence of developmental dyslexia in the general population at over 5%. It is also worth

noting that both the American Interagency Committee on Learning Disabilities, which reported to the U.S. Congress in 1987 and the 1992 report of the Ontario Inter-Ministerial Working Group on Learning Disabilities have used the 10% incidence rate for the development of their recommendations.

THE PRESENT PROBLEM CONCERNING LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

Quite often the school is not able to meet the needs of the learning disabled, which may lead to school failures, frustration and poor self-esteem, which in turn, could lead to anti-social behaviour. The link between learning disabilities and being involved in delinquent behaviour has been examined and confirmed in Canada. There is a severe economic and social price to be paid for not doing anything with regard to this group. Even with the earnest efforts of the government and many private organizations and agencies over the last three decades, there is still a long way to go before completing the task of fully integrating this group into all society has to offer. This is a major issue in North America and deserves the highest priority. Since it has not yet received this status indicates that the general public knows little or nothing about learning disabilities and that what it does know is often

faulty or misguided. It is imperative that public and private efforts be launched to raise the general awareness of the issue.

Many of the issues require financial support from the provincial or federal governments, the private sector or both. In a climate of conflicting demands placed on a decreasing money pool there is an urgent need to evaluate and prioritize the efficacious use of existing money. To redress past inequities, we are required to re-allocate funds directed elsewhere. By analyzing the history of learning disabilities, the history of operation, and the lack of funding, I plan to emphasize the importance that these associations need the proper funding, since they are sensitive to the special needs unique to the learning disabled public.

LEARNING DISABILITY ASSOCIATIONS

Since learning disabilities affect approximately 3 million, or 1 in 10 Canadians, many resources have been provided for those affected. Federally, there exists a Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, located in Ottawa. Also, there is an office in every province and territory, as well as a network of 132 chapters which are located in either major cities or smaller communities. Services vary from region to region, but each center is dedicated to developing and accessing resources and services which are appropriate to the contemporary realities of the learning disabled.

The Learning Disabilities Association of Peterborough was formed in 1986, to assist people with learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They are a non-profit organization funded by the United Way, the City and private donations. Staff and volunteer counselors are trained to provide help to individuals and families affected by learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorders. Their purpose is to enable all people affected to reach their full potential, by ensuring that all opportunities are available to meet the needs. They offer a number of services, a knowledgeable staff and an extensive resource library and can offer access to volunteer help and support.

One of the main goals of the LDAP is to encourage positive self concept in people with a learning disability. It is important for the individual to self-manage, allowing them to take charge of their lives. The LDAP provides services on teaching self-advocacy, so the individual and their families affected will be an expert when it comes to their disability and their school program plan. When parents are provided assistance on helping become advocates for their children, they learn about their rights and responsibilities, and support and education about the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) process.

There are policies relating to the access to funding and services. Firstly, the LDAO advocates that learning disabilities be identified in all federal and provincial legislation as a distinct and separate category of disabilities. The identification of learning disabilities as a separate category, will ensure

that funding and services will become more routinely available to persons with learning disabilities.

The fact that they are invisible has meant that many services needed by the learning disabled population, have not been as readily available to them as to other persons with more obvious disabilities. Secondly, the LDAO advocates that education, social services, support services, post secondary education and adult support services for persons with learning disabilities be funded by the relevant Ministries and Government agencies as they are for persons with physical and developmental disabilities. These services are essential to the success of persons with learning disabilities in the workplace and in the community. The Report of the Interministerial Working Group on Learning Disabilities released in October 1992, makes extensive recommendations about services for the population with learning disabilities which it says must be provided by various Ministries and Government agencies. It follows that funding should be available for these services. Universality of access can only be achieved through Government support.

The LDAO also advocates that students with learning disabilities enrolled in post secondary educational institutions must have access to the requisite accommodation of their learning disability. Students with learning disabilities who are capable of success in these institutions must not be denied this opportunity because of their disability. Appropriate services may include effective assessment services, access to and the opportunity to use assistive devices, availability of an advocate for the

student, and a special needs coordinator should be responsible to ensure that all supports are available when needed. Also, there should be in-service training for all faculty on learning disabilities, on reasonable accommodation in the classroom, in the laboratory, during examinations, as well as an understanding of the modified employment needs of some students. It is the responsibility of the institution to ensure reasonable accommodation is made.

While community-based Associations of learning disabilities are ostensibly educational in nature, the program participants are having their social needs met, and their social skills developed. In Addition, for the services to be effective, they must have political support endorsed by the LDAO. Also, the programs teach participants to become more involved decision-makers on issues that affect their lives. Of necessity, the services are less traditional in focus, since they do not want to perpetuate the approach that may not have worked for them in the first place. Such associations also impact the community economically, enhancing the employment skills of the program participants.

Since schools work directly with the learning disabled students, the more aware professionals are of the LDAP, will help ensure that all opportunities are available to meet the needs of their students. Their purpose is to acquaint professionals working in the field of education with the current literature and research in the field of learning disabilities. One of the organizational objectives of the LDAP is to investigate the feasibility of collaboration with other services in providing special services to individuals

and families affected by LD/ADD. When schools have worked together with the LDAP doing sessions promoting self- advocacy and teaching the myths and realities of a learning disability, which helps in promoting a positive self-concept in persons who have been 'labeled'. Finally, by informing the teachers of the different programs offered, may increase Chapter and Board membership, which could, in turn increase their Chapter's fund raising abilities.

Overall, the hope of this research and the purpose of all Learning Disabilities Association's in Canada, is to encourage the community at large to develop an awareness of, empathy for, and an interest in the problems faced by people with learning disabilities.

WHAT I LEARNED

Students with learning disabilities must be provided with Individualized Education or Program Plan (IEP) designed to maximize the student's strengths while ameliorating any deficits. Because each student has a distinct learning pattern, effective intervention requires identification of this pattern and the individualization of any special education program accordingly. The IEP should contain updates on assessments, skill levels, long and short term goals, measurable objectives, strategies and resources, ongoing evaluation, accommodation plan and any assistive devices to be used. A special education program is based on and modified by the results of continuous assessment and evaluation and includes a plan containing specific objectives and an outline of educational services that meets the needs of the exceptional pupil.

Each year, a collaborative project sponsored by the Queen's Trent Education Program, Trent Valley Literacy Association, and the LDAP makes it possible for 30 grade 3 children to receive tutoring in reading. It is called The Encouraging Young Reader's Program, and is funded by the United Way and the Trillium Foundation. The Trillium Foundation also made it possible to continue the "Adolescent Self Advocacy" workshops at five local high schools, for this year.

I participated in the workshops at Lakefield District Secondary School and Thomas A. Stewart Secondary School (TAS). There were 8 (6 male) grade 9 students involved in the five sessions at the

latter school and 14 (8 male) grade 12 students involved in the "Preparing for College Workshop" held in Lakefield. In the first session, the TAS students were not interested and felt it necessary to act up. They did, however, open up as the weeks went by and we received a thank you from 2 of the participants. On the other hand, the one Lakefield session was really successful because of the maturity of the students.

I prepared a questionnaire for the guidance counselors and any teacher involved in the workshops. I received input from 2 guidance counselors and 1 teacher. The goal was to learn of any involvement with the LDAP and what could be done to increase more awareness. However, any questionnaires given, needed to be passed by the Board of the LDAP, so I could only ask questions. Similarly, I had 3 small interviews with learning disabled students, Sarah, Mike and Lee, aged 15, 17 and 18.

Sarah, a 15 year old student at Thomas A. Stewart said that she was not involved in any I.P.R.C. meetings, or informed of the nature of her exceptionality. I asked if her parents had any involvement, since they decide when their child is old enough to be informed, and she did not know. However, both parents and students should be made aware of this process prior to the date that the student turns 16. This student's attitude changed dramatically. She was rude and obnoxious during the first session, but during the final workshop, she asked many questions and had learned about her IEP.

There was a large difference in the attitude of the students at Lakefield High. They were mostly grade 12 students, who were planning to apply for college or university and were very concerned with their future as a learning disabled student. This group of 14 students had a greater understanding of their unique needs and strengths, since they were more familiar with their I.E.P. The students had never been to the LDAP, however, one student said that his mom was really involved.

Mike told me that his mom has been involved in his education and learning disability from as long as he can remember. Thus, he learned at a very young age to become an effective self-advocate for himself. He admitted to having troubles with classes and teachers in both elementary and high school, but he had the confidence to approach his teachers and told them of his difficulties. He said that this was the most difficult part. Once he clearly communicated his problems, he said that they were accommodating to his needs.

As a nontraditional grade 12 student, Lee told me that the academic system is very destructive to those students who do not fit into the little pre-made boxes. His learning disability was not formally detected until last year, so he went through both public school and high school being extremely frustrated. Thus, he had a great deal of anger towards the school system and teachers. Lee's story hit home, as he was eager to alert educators of the need to reach children with learning disabilities in their early years, and to teach them in ways that will help them succeed.

The teachers and guidance counselors response to my questions were interesting. All were familiar with the LDAP, although none had ever been. They have been doing these workshops together for the past 3 years and found them to be beneficial. They were too busy to become a member of the LDAP, but all were interested in attending seminars, if they were held in Peterborough. A guidance counselor suggested that funding support is essential to place teacher preparation – the upgrading of an entire profession – high on the national agenda. Successful outcomes for learning disabled individuals should not be allowed to fall on the poor or ineffective training of personnel involved with individuals with learning disabilities. Presently, all teachers are required to have the training necessary to achieve the competence levels outlined in the regulations of the Ministry of Education. (Reference Regulation 298)

All of the professionals whom I worked with, had a thorough understanding of the complexities faced by the learning disabled student. The main concern of 2 of the participants, a teacher and a guidance counselor, was the lack of government response, considering the importance of effective classroom management for the learning disabled student.

There is no easy solution to the management of learning disabled or ADD in the classroom. After all is said and done, the effectiveness of any treatment for this disorder at school depends upon the knowledge and the persistence of the school and the individual teacher. All teachers described their experiences with the learning disabled and their families as different and unique in each situation. The

more successful cases were when there was greater parental involvement. The students who knew little about their disorder, or whose parents had little involvement, had a negative attitude towards their diagnoses. For example, when the group of students at Thomas A. Stewart were asked what they thought a learning disability was the majority wrote that it meant you were slow, dumb and were going nowhere in life. The few that had wrote reasonable answers had had prior background in understanding their Individualized Education Plan and positive parental involvement. There were no students in this group who admitted to any prior knowledge of the LDAP.

My analysis suggests a course of action that is both strategic and principled. In the short term, professionals working with the learning disabled ought to continue to work in ways that directly benefit the students to whom they are accountable and for whom they care for. However, in the long run, it is less important to expand the category of 'normal' and instead seek to assert the value of difference in ways that apply not just to marginalized others eradicated within the category of normal. Difference is, after all, what makes us who we are, and the "normalizing" tendencies of schooling (and their marginalizing effects) must be challenged by those seeking to create the kind of classroom where individual identity and the sense of worthiness takes form. The stigma of "disabled" or "low IQ" or "lower socioeconomic class" too frequently forces young people into being the recipients of "treatment", sometimes from the most benevolent motives on the part of those hoping to "help".

To really help, then, is to work daily to remove the stigma of difference, to create classrooms in which relationship and dialogue, are central, as opposed to treatment and training. Also, important is to create a concept of a community based not on normalcy and competitiveness, but rather on diversity, mutuality, and social justice. In the Trent-Queen's Concurrent Education Program, there is a big emphasis on the inclusionary strategies to accommodate to students with special needs.

Throughout the past 20 years, more and more people are becoming familiar with the problems and special needs of individuals affected with learning disabilities and ADHD. Even though such a large amount of the population is affected, many people still do not fully understand, since it is a non-visible disorder. Since this is not a clinical service, there is a lack of government support and response.

In the Annual Report produced by the LDAP, the statistics report that the number of new clients from April 1st, 1997 to March 31, 1998 was 460 (over the phone and in the office). There were 91 students involved in the Self-advocacy groups and 17 sessions on community awareness, with 588 participants. Also, there were 133 participants involved in the 5 sessions of parent education seminars. Finally, 30 children were involved in the tutoring program.

In the 1991 census, the population of Peterborough was 119,995. Therefore, we can assume that there are at least 12,000 people who have a learning disability. There are many more people who the LDAP has yet to help. They are currently doing a needs assessment in Northumberland County. This

is to find out what services exist for children and adults with learning disabilities and to find out if there is a need for service to be provided to Northumberland County from the LDAP.

Educators are only one field of professionals who work with the learning disabled. We want to continue to educate and to work with representatives from the various sectors such as recreation, legislation and justice, health, social services, vocational training and employment with current literature and research. Also, it is necessary to ensure that their programs are appropriate to meet the needs of learning disabled. Further research into these other fields and their relationship to the LDAP would be interesting to investigate more collaboration of services in Peterborough. The Learning Disability Association provides services to people with this disability as well as public education. Greater awareness of our programs in the general public can lead to better and earlier identification of learning disabilities resulting in fewer problems later on. When people are more aware of the problem, they are more likely to support the work of the agency.