

Definition of disability: a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities.

Definition of difference: a point or way in which people or things are not the same.

This document is based off my personal opinion and bias as a student with learning disabilities.

Context: When talking about students with learning challenges many educators will say “Learning Difference” and tend to shy away from saying “Learning Disability”. I had one experience when talking to a parent at an open house who seemed to have a very clear opinion that we should use the word difference as opposed to the word disability. It used to be that everyone would simply say Learning Disability and there would be no second thought to it. Over the last decade or so people started to question if the word disability was stigmatizing for the students who had learning disabilities because the word disability is associated with severe mental and physical issues. People started moving toward the word difference because they wanted to imply that there was nothing wrong with these kids but that they just learned differently.

My Opinion: In my opinion we should use the phrase “Learning Disability” when talking about a student's academics, but we should use the phrase “Learning Difference” when talking about a person in the context of the rest of their life.

Arguments/Reasons: Learning disabilities have a physiological base to them. They come from abnormalities in the brain whether it be damage to the frontal lobe or an imbalance of chemicals. This is a physical issue in the brain that can't be fixed but can be helped with certain learning strategies. If someone has one leg, yes they are different, but saying they are different is implying that they could have been another way which is insulting. This puts a guilt on the person who has the disability that maybe if they had done something different or tried harder they could have had a second leg, which is false. The same logic applies to learning disabilities. The word disability can be a relief to someone because it implies that there is an actual reason for their struggles and it's not their fault. Growing up I was very fortunate to get evaluated for ADD at a young age. Before I was evaluated or even understood the concept that there was something wrong with me that I could not help, I struggled with self confidence in grammar school. As I have grown older I am fortunate to understand that I have something in my brain that makes it harder for me to learn in the education system today. Just as Covid-19 hit I was starting a new round of evaluations. I did this because math has become more and more difficult for me. Now because I have had talks with my mom and therapist that have helped me understand that I cannot help my learning disabilities, I told my mom I wanted to get evaluated because I want to know why math is so hard.

Another argument for why it should be called a disability is that disabilities have legal protections. One legal protection is the I.D.E.A (individuals with disabilities education act). This act states

that any student with any disability mental or physical must receive appropriate accommodations. The A.D.A. (Americans with Disabilities Act) protects everyone with disabilities against discrimination. If we call it a difference this might mean kids who are entitled to legal protections won't receive them.

I want to make the distinction that I believe Learning Disabilities only affect most people negatively in school. Michael Phelps, Adam Levine, and many more celebrities have spoken out about their experience with ADD/ADHD. While all of their stories are different they all seem to take a similar course. School was really hard but then they were able to focus well on something they loved doing. This is why I think it is ok to use the phrase learning difference outside of school.

Attentional disabilities

ADD- hard time focusing anywhere lack of ability to focus

ADHD- too much focus, trying to focus on too much

Tips and tricks, structure whether that is in the schedule or creating a clear homework plan
Extra time with as much as possible, breaking assignments into chunks- more feasible,
medication, exercise, allowing kids to take breaks, provide multi sensory teaching, variety in the activities.

Language disabilities

Dyslexia- The brain does not perceive words on a page correctly sometimes letters can look backward or student has hard time reading on the line

Tips and tricks, audio books or reading allowed to them, bigger print, using a index card on the page to keep track of what line they are, shorter reading assignments

Receptive language and expressive language disorders- One has troubling processing a lot of linguistic information at once. Expressive language disorder- someone has trouble speaking in a way that reflects their thoughts. This also applies to when someone is trying to formulate ideas onto a piece of paper.

Tips and tricks, Receptive- recording lectures or lessons, having a note taker,
expressive, having a scribe, breaking writing assignments down into small pieces, creating a structure for the writing, Giving students time for formulating their ideas, giving a student a signal well before you call on them so they have time to figure out what they are going to say in their head

Executive functioning disabilities

Difficulty with organizing and time management- similar to ADD and ADHD also hard to plan things out.

Tips and tricks, Structure and schedule, extra time, breaking things into chunks, finding a planner that works for the student, very organized system for the work.

Anxiety is a very apparent factor with all of these which can increase the severity by a lot. This is why it is important for teachers to show patience and understand with these kids.