Essentials

of Specific Learning

Disability Identification

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Alternative Research-Based Procedures for SLD Identification

The third option included in the 2006 regulations allows "the use of other alternative research-based procedures" for determining SLD (§ 300.307[a]). Although vague, this option has been interpreted by some as involving the evaluation of a "pattern of strengths and weaknesses" in the identification of SLD via tests of academic achievement, cognitive abilities, and neuropsychological processes (Hale et al., 2008, 2010; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Several empirically based methods of SLD identification that are consistent with the third option are presented in this book, such as Berninger's framework of assessment for intervention (Chapter 9), Flanagan and colleagues' operational definition of SLD (Chapter 10), Hale and Fiorello's Concordance-Discordance Model (Chapter 8), and Naglieri's Discrepancy/Consistency Model (Chapter 7). Readers may also be interested in the Response to the Right Intervention (RTRI) model proposed by Della Toffalo (2010).

Figure 1.1 provides an illustration of the three common components of third-method approaches to SLD identification (Flanagan, Fiorello, & Ortiz, 2010; Hale et al., 2008). The two bottom ovals depict academic and cognitive weaknesses, and their horizontal alignment indicates that the level of performance in
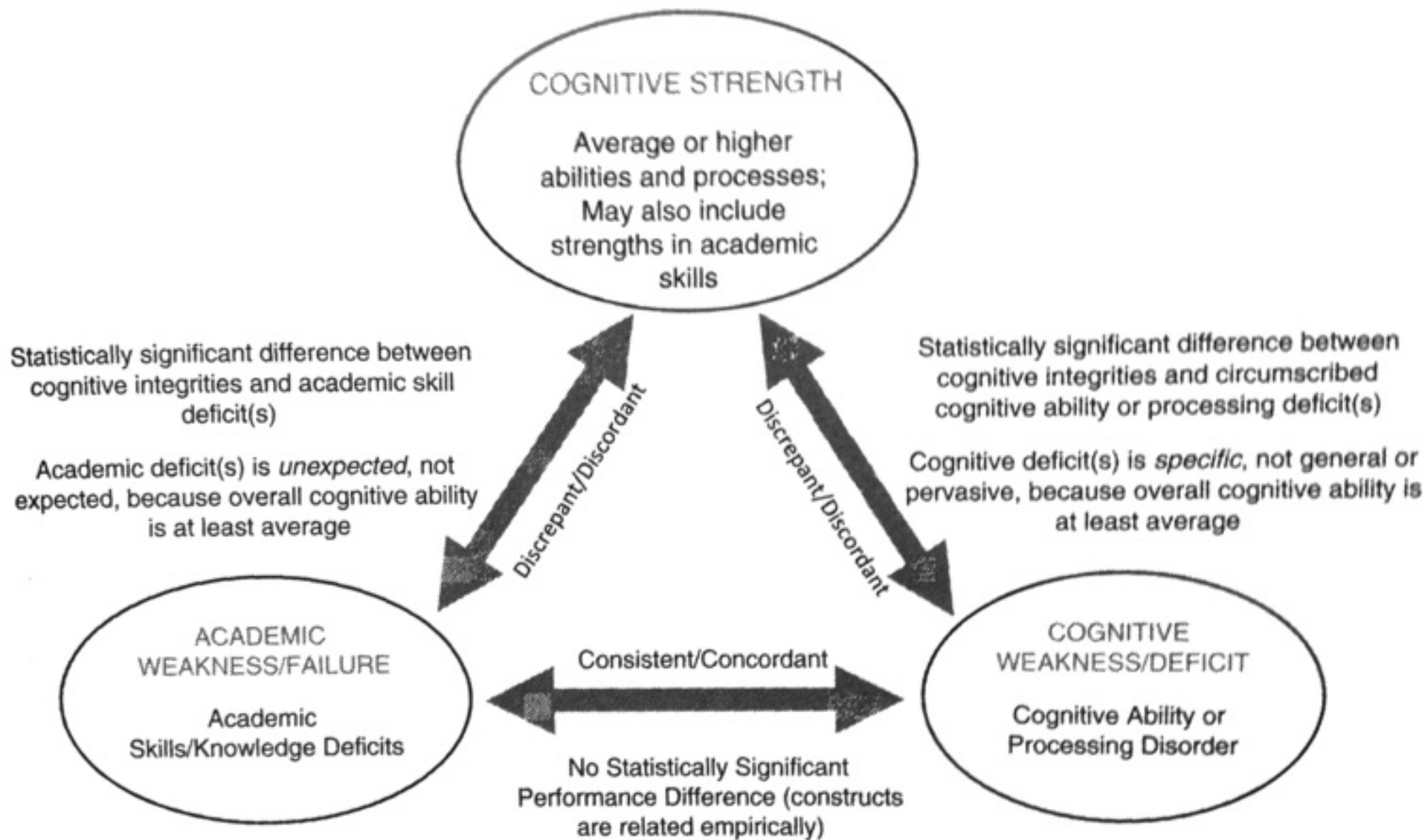
COGNITIVE STRENGTH

Average or higher abilities and processes; May also include strengths in academic skills

Statistically significant difference between cognitive integrities and academic skill deficit(s)

Academic deficit(s) is *unexpected*, not expected, because overall cognitive ability is at least average

Discrepant/Discordant

Discrepant/Discordant

Statistically significant difference between cognitive integrities and circumscribed cognitive ability or processing deficit(s)

Cognitive deficit(s) is *specific*, not general or pervasive, because overall cognitive ability is at least average

ACADEMIC WEAKNESS/FAILURE

Academic Skills/Knowledge Deficits

Consistent/Concordant

No Statistically Significant Performance Difference (constructs are related empirically)

COGNITIVE WEAKNESS/DEFICIT

Cognitive Ability or Processing Disorder

Figure 1.1. Common Components of Third-Method Approaches to SLD Identification

both domains (academic and cognitive) is expected to be similar or consistent. The double-headed arrow between the bottom two ovals indicates that the difference between measured performances in the weak academic area(s) is not significantly different from performance in the weak cognitive area(s). Again, in children with SLD there exists an empirical or otherwise clearly observable and meaningful relationship between the academic and cognitive deficits, as the cognitive deficit is the presumed cause of the academic deficit. The oval depicted at the top of Figure 1.1 represents generally average (or better) cognitive or intellectual ability. The double-headed arrows between the top oval and the two bottom ovals in the figure indicate the presence of a statistically significant or clinically meaningful difference in measured performance between general cognitive ability and the areas of academic and cognitive weakness. The pattern of cognitive and academic strengths and weaknesses represented in Figure 1.1 retains and reflects the concept of unexpected underachievement that has historically been synonymous with the SLD construct (Kavale & Forness, 2000).

Determining whether a child has a weakness or deficit usually involves making normative-based comparisons of the child's performance against a representative sample of same-age or same-grade peers from the general population. If weaknesses or deficits in the child's academic achievement profile are not identified, then the issue of SLD may be moot because such weaknesses are a necessary component of the definition. p 245

et al. (2011) and Flanagan, Alfonso, Ortiz, and Dynda (2010).

A particularly salient aspect of the CHC-based operational definition of SLD is the concept that a weakness or deficit in a cognitive ability or process underlies difficulties in academic performance or skill development. Because research demonstrates that the relationship between the cognitive dysfunction and the manifest learning problems are causal in nature (e.g., Fletcher, Taylor, Levin, & Satz, 1995; Hale & Fiorello, 2004), data analysis at this level should seek to ensure

that identified weaknesses or deficits on cognitive tests bear an empirical relationship to those weaknesses or deficits in academic skills identified previously. It is this very notion that makes it necessary to draw upon cognitive and neuropsychological theory and research to inform operational definitions of SLD and increase the reliability and validity of the SLD identification process. Theory and its related research base not only specify the relevant constructs that ought to be measured at Levels I and III, but predict the manner in which they are related. Furthermore, application of current theory and research provides a substantive empirical foundation from which interpretations and conclusions may be drawn. Rapid References 10.5 and 10.6 provide a summary of the relations between CHC cognitive abilities and processes and reading and math achievement, respectively.

Level IV: Data Integration—Analysis of a Pattern of Strengths and Weaknesses Consistent with SLD

This level of evaluation revolves around a theory- and research-guided examination of performance across academic skills, cognitive abilities, and neuropsychological processes to determine whether the child's underachievement (as identified at Level I) is indeed *unexpected*. When the process of SLD identification has reached this level, three necessary criteria for SLD identification have already been met: (1) one or more weaknesses or deficits in academic performance; (2) one or more weaknesses or deficits in cognitive abilities and/or neuropsychological processes; and (3) exclusionary factors determined not to be the primary causes of the academic and cognitive weaknesses or deficits. What has not been determined, however, is whether the pattern of results supports the notion of unexpected underachievement in a manner that suggests SLD. The nature of unexpected underachievement, within the context of the CHC-based operational definition suggests that not only does a child possess specific, circumscribed, and related academic and cognitive weaknesses or deficits— referred to as a *below-average aptitude-achievement consistency*—but that these weaknesses exist along with average or better overall intelligence. p. 261

nesses exist along with average or better overall intelligence.