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Essentials

of Specific Learning Disability Identification

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stated by the U.S. Department of Education Roundtable (American Institutes for Research, 2002). In order to utilize a cognitive processing approach to SLD identification, three main components are needed. First, the child must have significant intraindividual differences among the basic psychological processes such that the lowest processing score is substantially below average. Second, there needs to be a significant difference between average processing scores and achievement. Third, there needs to be consistency between poor processing scores and academic deficits (Hale & Fiorello, 2004; Naglieri, 1999, 2005). This is referred to as a Discrepancy/Consistency Model by Naglieri (1999).

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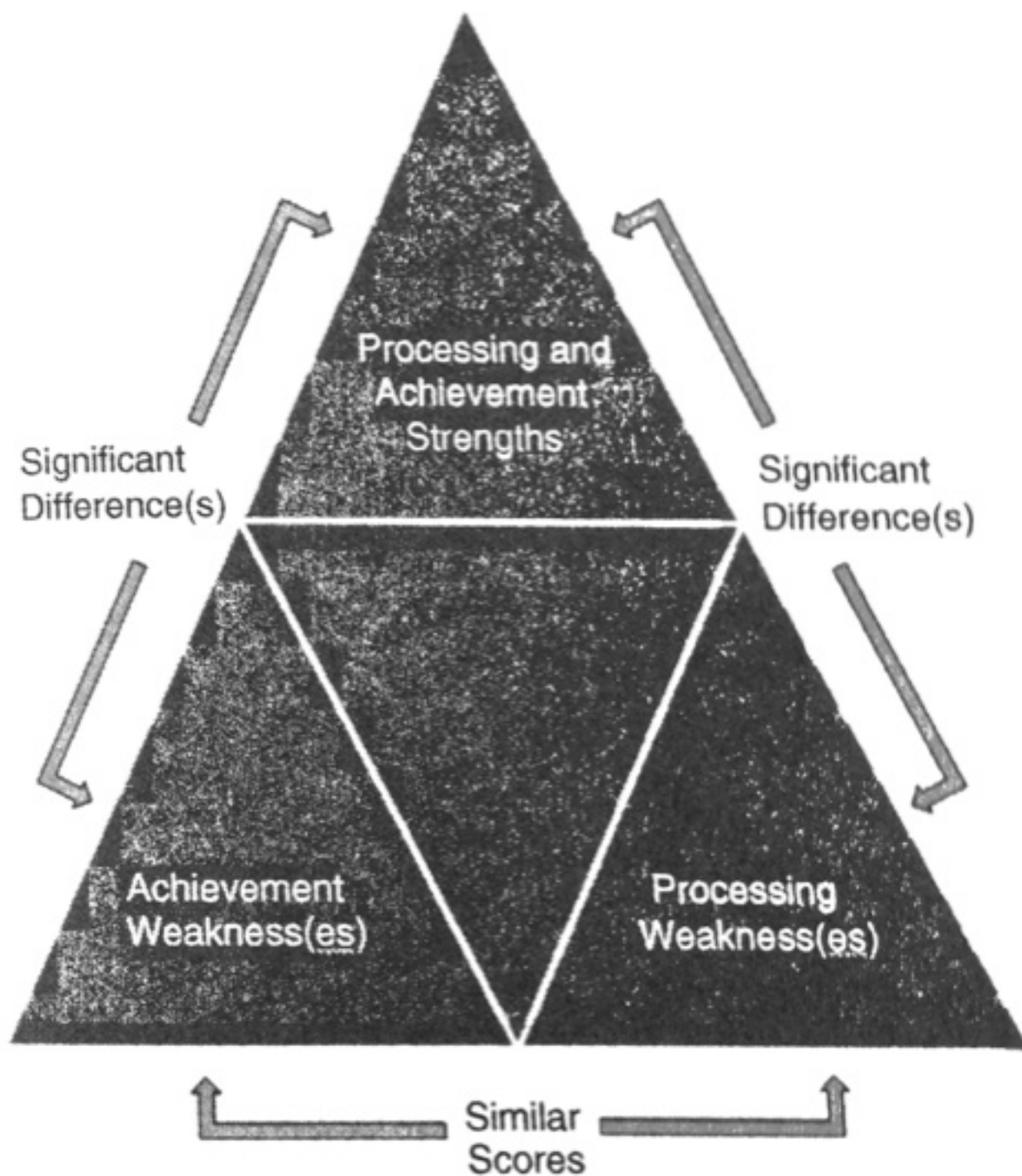


Figure 7.1. Discrepancy/Consistency Model for SLD Diagnosis

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Additionally, the child must have deficient academic performance in a specific area to be considered eligible for programming for children with a *specific* learning disability. The relationship among the variables is illustrated in Figure 7.1. This figure includes a significant *discrepancy* between the child's high cognitive processing scores and some specific academic achievement, a significant *discrepancy* between the child's high and low cognitive processing scores, and *consistency* between the child's low processing and low achievement scores.

The Discrepancy/Consistency Model for the identification of specific learning disabilities was described first by Naglieri (1999). The goal of the method is to obtain a systematic examination of variability of both cognitive and academic achievement test scores. Determining whether the cognitive processing scores differ significantly is accomplished using the method originally proposed by Davis (1959), popularized by Kaufman (1979), and modified by Silverstein

(1993). This so-called, ipsative method determines when the child's scores are reliably different from the child's average score. This technique has been applied to a number of tests including, for example, the WISC-IV (Naglieri & Paolitto, 2005), the CAS (Naglieri & Das, 1997a), and the SB5 (Roid, 2003). It is important to note that in the Discrepancy/Consistency Model described by Naglieri (1999), the ipsative approach is applied to the PASS scales, which represent four neuropsychologically defined constructs, *not* the subtests as is usually done, for example, with the Wechsler scales. This changes the method from one that demands considerable clinical interpretation of the meaning of *subtest* variability to analysis of *scales* that have been theoretically defined and have higher reliability and validity. This distinction is important because the criticisms of the ipsative method (McDermott, Fantuzzo & Glutting, 1990) have centered around subtest-, not scale-level, analysis.

RTI AND COGNITIVE HYPOTHESIS TESTING FOR IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES

The Best of Both Worlds

James B. Hale
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THE ENIGMA OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES: AN INTRODUCTORY ANALYSIS

Children who have specific cognitive processing strengths and deficits that lead to poor academic achievement may have a *specific learning disability* (SLD) (Hale, Kaufman, Naglieri, & Kavale, 2006). In the landmark 1975 Public Law 94-142, the U.S. Department of Education first formalized ability-achievement discrepancy in an attempt to define the essence of SLD and achieve consensus among stakeholders (e.g., Mercer, Jordan, Allsopp, & Mercer, 1996). The focus of researchers and practitioners alike was placed on discrepancy, with less consideration given to the essential SLD statutory definition that specifies *children with SLD have a deficit in the basic psychological processes that adversely affects academic achievement*.

Growing dissatisfaction with the SLD definition and discrepancy method has ignited a firestorm among seemingly polarized factions, who support either summative or formative evaluation (see Batsche, Kavale, & Kovalesski, 2006), suggesting a paradigm shift in practice is necessary (e.g., Reschly & Ysseldyke,

boards of education (see Zirkel & Thomas, 2009).

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Of the leading candidates for a pattern of strengths and deficits approach, Hale, Flanagan et al. (2008) highlight similarities among their third method approaches for identification of SLD and other disorders. Unlike discrepancy and RTI approaches, these empirical methods address the statutory and regulatory IDEA SLD identification requirements through careful evaluation of cognitive and/or neuropsychological processing patterns, and the academic achievement deficits associated with these patterns (Fiorello, Hale et al., 2008; Hale, Flanagan et al., 2008; Kavale et al., 2005). As a result, they are entirely consistent with IDEA requirements for indentifying a child with SLD (34 C.F.R. Parts 300 and 301; Federal Register, 2006), but they also help determine whether the child has another disorder interfering with academic achievement, something that cannot be accomplished using discrepancy or RTI methods.

DON'T FORGET

The Learning Disabilities Roundtable for the U.S. Department of Education noted, "The identification of a core cognitive deficit, or a disorder in one or more psychological processes, that is predictive of an imperfect ability to learn, is a marker for a specific learning disability." Children with SLDs process information differently than other children, and as school practitioners, is it incumbent upon us to articulate that in meaningful ways, both for assessment and intervention purposes.

Third method pattern approaches that include formal cognitive and neuropsychological assessment make sense given the conclusions drawn by 14

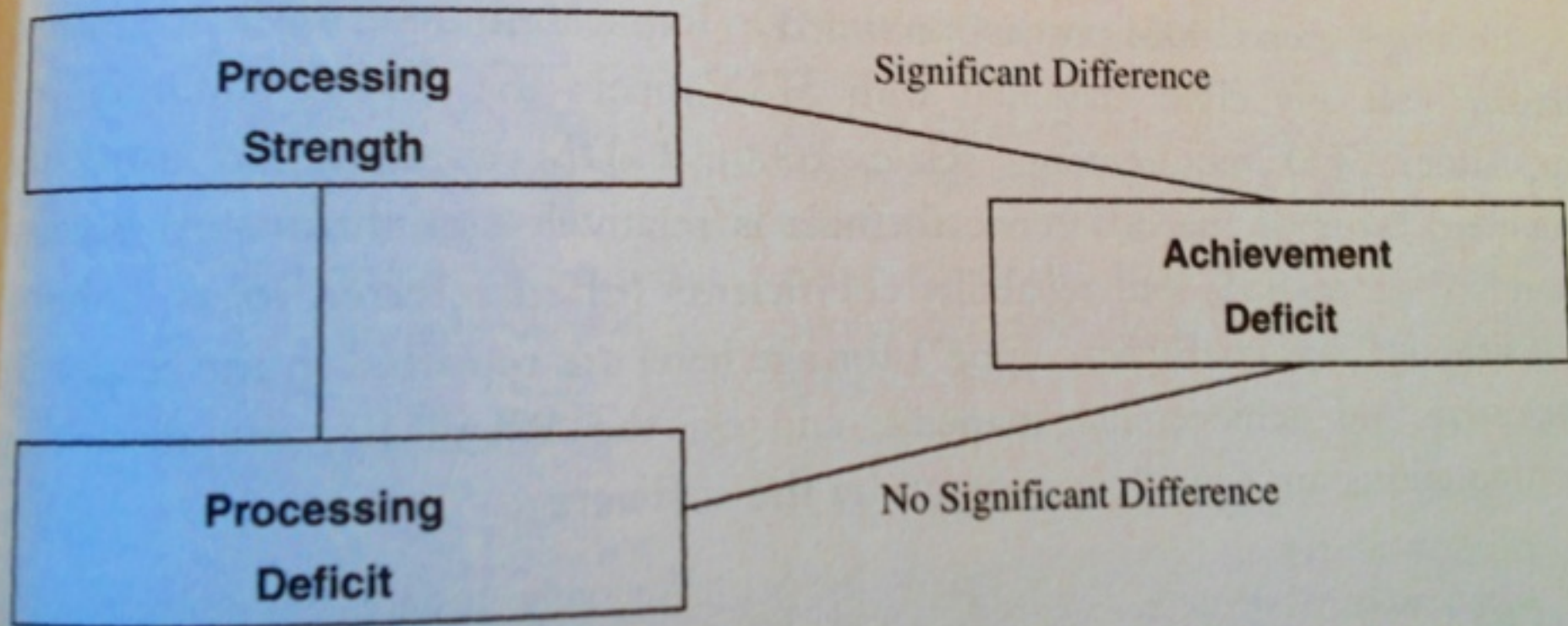


Figure 8.1. The Concordance-Discordance Model of SLD Identification

Source: After Hale & Fiorello, 2004.

Fiorello et al., 2009; Hale & Fiorello, 2004; Hale et al., 2006; Miller, Getz, & Leffard, 2006), and has been adopted in principle in modern achievement measures (e.g., WIAT-III; Wechsler, 2009). Hale, Fiorello et al. (2008) found that fewer children were identified with SLD using C-DM than the traditional discrepancy approach (25% who met discrepancy criteria did not show significant C-DM), so it has the potential to reduce overidentification of SLD, a concern of many in the field (e.g., Kavale et al., 2005).

Despite the promise of a C-DM approach for advancing practice, Hale and Fiorello (2004) admonish practitioners to avoid just using the highest cognitive score, the lowest cognitive score, and the lowest achievement score, and then determine whether they are significantly different. They argue that clinical significance and ecological validity of findings must accompany statistical significance in SLD identification. It is important to examine the literature to ensure that the cognitive strength is often not related to the academic deficit in question (e.g., fluid reasoning and word reading); and the cognitive deficit should be empirically associated with the academic deficit (e.g., working memory and reading comprehension).

CAUTION

The C-DM approach for SLD identification requires careful evaluation of cognitive strengths, deficits, and associated achievement deficits to ensure ecological validity of findings. It is inappropriate to just choose the highest cognitive score, the lowest cognitive score, and the lowest achievement score, and then see if they are significantly different, as this strictly numerical approach will lead to poor diagnostic and intervention decisions.