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Examining Learning Disabilities in Schools through an Intersectional and Equitable Lens

Enoch Leung

Abstract

This book chapter examines the intersection between learning disabilities (LD) and other marginalized identities to understand the diverse experiences of students with LDs and the disproportionalities that exist in LD identification and support in schools. Largely driven by the history and evolution of inclusion of disabilities in schools, Response to Intervention (RtI) arose as a model designed to increase academic performance among students with and without disabilities. Though RtI is a model shown to minimize inappropriate identification of LDs, intersectionality must be taken into consideration to understand the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students in special education. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress suggest social factors (e.g. socioeconomic disadvantages, racial and ethnic intersection) as a potential cause for disproportionate representation and points to a need to further understand the disproportionality of different groups of students being over- or under-identified to receive special education services.

Keywords: Learning Disability, Equity, Intersectionality, Education, Diversity, Culture

1. Introduction

Approximately 150 million students 18 years old and under have a disability label that qualifies them to receive special education services in schools [1]. In the United States, many students from minority groups (e.g., English learners, ethnic-racial minority, low social class) were overrepresented in special education. The primary reason for the overrepresentation is due to the teachers' lack of cultural knowledge and lack of culturally responsive instruction that is adequate and responsive to their diverse students' needs [2]. Though the Individual Disabilities Education Improvement Act [3] was established to address supporting students with disabilities in providing adequate education, the disproportionate overrepresentation of students from marginalized groups generate a needed discussion surrounding the inequities present in learning disability (LD) referral and identification.

Teachers' lack of cultural competence in their instruction leads to a broader issue surrounding culturally responsive instruction that has shown to be effective in responding to the needs of their diverse students [4]. The question arises whether the existence of LD is a result of neurobiological differences that lead to

difficulties in learning [5] or social factors [6]. For example, dyslexia is increasingly being debated whether it is a valid difficulty [7]. One can consider the societal implications of being a poor reader or having inadequate mathematics skills. Rather than placing the disability limitation on the individual person's physical or mental limitation as postulated by the medical model of disability [6], the social model of disability focuses on the environment surrounding the individual, identifying systemic barriers, derogatory attitudes, and social exclusion making it difficult for the individual to function appropriately [6]. From this perspective, one questions the purpose of having a LD label as the basis for decision making in education. As there are multiple approaches to identifying and supporting students with LDs, it is critical to understand, through a social model of disability perspective, how an LD identification can benefit students with LDs.

As there is no "gold standard" to indicate what is or is not considered an LD, the approaches to identifying and supporting students with LDs do not appear to be strongly evidence-based. The social model of disability focuses on understanding how school processes such as LD identification result in inequitable assignments to specific groups of students including racial-ethnic and linguistic minorities, low socioeconomic class, and boys [6, 8]. However, looking at LD through a social lens brings to light further questioning on the issues surrounding LD identification such as the disproportionality of identification based on social circumstances such as intersectional identities of sex, class, and ethnicity. It may be problematic to simply identify and assign the LD label to students based on cognitive measures that may be subjective in nature and influenced by social factors. This book chapter attempts to understand the societal issues surrounding LD identification through an intersectional lens and its implication on education. This book chapter will be contextualized in the North American context (including both United States and Canada) to understand the social factors (e.g., socioeconomic disadvantages, sex differences, and racial and ethnic intersection) as a potential cause for disproportionate representation.

2. Learning disabilities

Learning disability (LD) is a label typically assigned to students based on their achievement levels, behaviors, or communication skills [9]. One federal disability category, 'Specific Learning Disability', encompasses all of the various LDs including disabilities like dyslexia (reading disability), dyscalculia (mathematics disability), dysgraphia (writing disability), and expressive language disability [9]. It is important to note that labels such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and Down syndrome are not categorized under 'Specific Learning Disability'. Though LD is commonly misconstrued as students with low intelligence quotient (IQ), this can lead to a misperception equating LD with students with poor educational outcomes rather than an inequality in the school environment for students' learning opportunities [9, 10]. Due to the lack of gold standard in identifying LDs, the different approaches present in identifying LD brings into question what the LD label represents and whether placement into special education benefits students' learning opportunities.

Around the 2000s, there were three dominant cognitive discrepancy methods to identify LDs: 1) ability-achievement discrepancy model, 2) low-achievement model, and 3) intra-individual discrepancy model [11]. The ability-achievement discrepancy model assigns students the LD label when their achievement levels are lower than expected given their overall IQ. In this model, the discrepancy must not be attributable to the student's social background or behaviors [12]. The second model, low-achievement model assigns a LD label to students who are unexpectedly performing

below a certain achievement level [12]. Lastly, the intra-individual discrepancy model assigns students a LD label if they show an uneven profile, defined as specific cognitive measures indicating strengths in some areas and weakness in others [12]. However, these three models have been criticized for not systematically identifying students who do have an LD as measures of achievement may not accurately assess ability but rather contextualized knowledge that have been shown to benefit White, middle-upper class students in attaining higher scores. As it is shown that LD identification approaches vary and lack a gold standard, many questions the existence of LDs [13].

Two major issues exist in defining and identifying LD. First, LD represents an unobservable latent construct that does not exist apart from its measurements (e.g., IQ, achievement) [14]. Second, there is a level of comorbidity with other developmental disorders that may explain the IQ-achievement gap necessary for a LD identification [14]. As achievement and IQ, both scores that can be understood as inequitable towards non-White, lower-middle class students, are used as a basis for LD identification, it can be construed that LD identification does not simply identify students with LDs (e.g., writing, reading, mathematics) but also the social inequities that are present in students' lives (e.g., class, sex, class) [9, 10]. One model that has attempted to move beyond simply identifying LDs is Response to Intervention, a model to better account for social factors (e.g., class, sex, class).

3. Response to intervention

Inclusive education (IE) is the idea that education is a basic human right for all students, following the principles of social justice [15]. The World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) defined general principles of IE as providing universal access to schools for everyone and promote equity, being proactive and predicting barriers in access to education and identifying recourses to eliminate such barriers [16]. IE is a process which increases the opportunities and capacity education to meet needs and interests of all learners. In the wake of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, IE has become increasingly important to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. One such framework, beyond the three cognitive-discrepancy approaches, is Response to Intervention (RTI). The three cognitive-discrepancy approaches focus on improving students with an IQ-achievement gap. However, there is evidence that the cognitive difficulties associated with LDs parallel the challenges experienced by students who have not received adequate instruction [17], leading to the question whether appropriate instruction is provided such that all students, regardless of the LD label, benefits in an opportunity to learn. This is the emergence of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model.

The RTI model consists of many different components broken down into three tiers. Tier 1 instruction consists of class-wide universal screening, defined as screening assessments to identify students likely to experience poor academic outcomes [18]. Tier 2 instruction involves small-group supplemental programs in addition to Tier 1 instruction with constant assessments conducted to determine whether students are responding to the more intensive Tier 2 instruction [18]. Tier 3 instruction involves individualized program instruction to supplement Tier 1 class-wide instruction [18]. Throughout each tier, progress monitoring is conducted to assess whether students are responding to the Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction to ensure that the academic outcome gap is decreasing [18]. Though this model moves beyond LD identification for labelling purposes and attempts to support all students, with the focus on reducing the academic gap, the RTI model is still focused on outcomes that are socially influenced. As such, subjectivity may be present inherently by

disadvantaging students with certain sociodemographic characteristics towards inequitable academic outcomes.

There have been increasing discussions surrounding a culturally responsive RTI model where RTI focuses on the contextual factors that impact achievement. In this scenario, although achievement is still the focus, RTI takes into consideration cultural factors that impact achievement [19, 20]. For culturally responsive RTI, teachers understand the cultural nature of learning, consider students' socio-cultural context of schools, and promote equity within school policies, decisions, and pedagogical practices. Therefore, though culturally responsive RTI is increasingly discussed, there appears to be difficulty in incorporating RTI taking into consideration students' intersectional identities, requiring significant amounts of support [21]. Across all LD identification methods, research has documented inconsistencies across schools, leading to the subjectivity inherent in LD identification and support, producing inequality by disadvantaging youth with certain sociodemographic characteristics [21, 22]. From the understanding of the issues surrounding LD identification across all methods, one questions the educational issues experienced by students with intersectional identities including, of which LDs are one of their social identities.

4. Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytical framework to examine how differing identities, such as race, sex, class, and sexuality, and how their combination plays out in different settings [23]. Though intersectionality examines different social identities, much of the literature has not, until recently, included disability to the list of social categories that marginalize individuals. Together, race-ethnicity, gender, disability, and social class are social identities that intersect with one another and result in oppression and discrimination [23].

Though there are increasing number of students who are being identified as having a LD, there appears to be a disproportionate number of LD identification towards students from racial-ethnic minority status, boys, and those who are from a lower socioeconomic status [9, 10]. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggests such social identities as potential causes for such disproportionate representation [24]. The over-identification of students with intersectional identities that receive special education services (e.g., students from diverse ethnicity and race, class, and sex) leads to question the responsiveness of LD identification approaches and the subjectivity inherent in identifying and labelling LD. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) found similar evidence pointing to a higher risk for students of color. Specifically, their data indicated that American Indian/Native, Black/African American, Native Hawaiian/Other, Hispanic/Latinx, and those with more than one race/ethnicity all received special education at a higher identification rate compared to Caucasian students [25]. Interestingly, this was not the case for Asian students [25]. However, existing literature has found that English Language Learners (ELL) are similarly overrepresented as being identified as students with LDs [9, 10, 26]. As such, this poses an interesting intersection of racial-ethnic minority students and students who are learning English, as it is assumed that students who are ELLs can also contain Asian students.

An emerging body of literature has found an over-identification for English Language Learner (ELL) students to receive special education services, highlighting a need for cultural competence and responsiveness [10, 26, 27]. As ELLs and race/ethnicity are closely intertwined in their identities, this book chapter attempts to further examine other intersections between LDs and other identities to understand the diverse experiences of students with LDs and the issues surrounding the

disproportionalities that exist in LD identification, and how relevant stakeholders can respond adequately in schools.

5. Educational issues for students with LD

Across the U.S., students with LDs constitute 34% of all students with disabilities, accounting for 4.5% of all students in schools [28]. For students without disabilities, 84% graduate, whereas 65.5% of students with disabilities graduate, indicating a need to further identify the necessary supports for students with LDs [28]. For example, after LD identification, students with LDs receive special education services, including learning in a separate classroom specifically designed for students with disabilities, a concept known as least restrictive environment (LRE) [29]. However, misidentifying students risk them being exposed to a less rigorous curriculum, lower expectations, and fewer opportunities to successfully transition them to postsecondary education [25]. Inappropriate LD identification can also result in social consequences, with students suffering from a loss of self-esteem, being exposed to greater stigma, and facing increased marginalization in classrooms (e.g., racial separation). Once misidentified, students are likely to stay in the special education program for the remainder of their academic trajectory [25].

Through an understanding of the social model of disability, labelling a student with LD is indicative that there are certain barriers in the classroom that is preventing them from performing at the same level compared to their peers without the LD label [6, 8]. Put into different words, students with LD are unfavorably biased against Caucasian middle-class norms of achievement. As labels such as LD are subjectively constructed based on unobservable latent construct of achievement, students with the LD label are perceived as deviating from the average or high IQ/achievement and is simply not receptive to the teaching practices that work for students without LD. In this manner, the LD label can be understood as a tool of inequality due to the lack of positive outcomes of being placed into special education placement.

LD label can also be understood as an intentional tool of inequality. From a social perspective in understanding LDs, LDs can be understood as a social construct that is defined relative to the context and situation, argued to be more prevalent in Western societies due to the emphasis on speed, literacy, and numeracy in the school system [30]. In other words, students labeled with LDs do not experience inequities due to their LD but the society that is structured to benefit students with normative qualities (i.e., Caucasian, middle-class). Due to the lack of objective and uniform diagnostic criteria in identifying LDs, variations across students can be understood as natural, with everyone possessing some level of 'disability' in different contexts relative to their peers [13, 30]. Therefore, LD identification can be understood as an inequity due to the societal emphasis on specific Western values (speed, literacy, and numeracy). This questions the validity of the LD identification as an inequitable perception in schools' responses to students with LDs. Moreover, there is evidence that having the LD label can have social psychological ramifications in their classroom experiences [9]. Below will be an exploration of inequalities experienced across different subgroups of LDs: 1) culture, race, and ethnicity, 2) sex, and 3) social class.

6. Inequalities of culture and LDs

Under a cultural identity, I have chosen to group cultural and linguistic identities together as they go hand in hand for cultures that do not speak English primarily in their country. However, predominant literature on inequities in LD identification

have focused on students learning English, also known as English Language Learners (ELLs). Though many studies have focused on culture and LDs through language barriers, broader cultural influences exist that influence the learning of students of color with LDs [10, 31]. For example, teachers expressed a lack of cultural understanding and competence to provide culturally relevant instruction to their culturally diverse students [4, 32].

For students with LDs, there is an increasing number of studies investigating the disproportionalities in LD overidentification. One such group of students are students with racial-ethnic minorities and those who are learning English. For example, African-American students with LDs reported negative consequences of their special education placement [12, 33]. Though they mentioned benefits of special education placement such as interactions with responsive teachers and more appropriate instructional pacing, the social consequences of having a LD label outweighed such benefits. They reported additional stigmatization by peers (in addition to their race-based harassment) [34], making limited academic progress due to a slow-paced curriculum, and barriers preventing them from returning to general education placements [33].

Much of the literature surrounding culture, race, and ethnicity disproportionalities involve students who do not primarily speak English. In the intersection between language and LD, the disproportionate labeling can be attributable to the flawed methods of LD identification (i.e., IQ and achievement) as cognitive ability measurements do not distinguish whether their lack of ability is due to their linguistic or learning ability [35]. As NCLD data [25] has shown that only 33% of students of color (i.e., Black) spend more than 80% of their day in general education classroom, compared to 55% of Caucasian students, the disproportionate placement of students of color into special education can be attributed to systemic racism inherent in the education system, considering the subjective nature of the LD identification procedures as well as the inadequate instruction to foster responsive learning opportunities for all students, including students of color.

In addition to students of color experiencing a disproportionate amount of LD identification perhaps due to the lack of responsive instruction or subjective nature of LD identification, language barriers exist for students who may have language barriers, commonly from students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The subjectivity in being able to tell whether students have a LD or whether the lack of ability is due to their language restrictions leads to subjective labeling of LD for students and whether the purpose of LD identification is valid. Evidence has shown that students who are both ELLs and identified as having a LD are placed at an increased risk for school failure than students in either group (ELLs or LDs), due to their barrier in participating in general education classes [36]. Therefore, the disproportionality of having students who may have language barriers rather than a learning barrier can pose more academic risk than providing special education support. With this in mind, it is unclear whether there is a benefit in a LD identification, particularly due to the subjective nature of LD identification and an understanding of whether appropriate instruction can remedy this language or learning gap.

7. Inequality of sex and LDs

Much of the research surrounding disproportionality and sex differences found an over-identification of LDs among boys. Previous research exploring sex differences among students with LD found girls being 1.5 to 6 times less likely to be identified as having a LD compared to boys [10, 37]. The differences in LD identification between boys and girls is attributed to the referral bias, a step prior to LD identification. From this bias, this brings up another issue with the LD identification process

and the subjective nature biased against students not from the dominant culture (i.e., Caucasian, middle-class). There appears to have a tendency where boys are referred to special education services for LD more than girls, leading to inequity for all students, over-identification for boys and under-identification for girls. This over-identification of LD identification among boys was due to the problematic behaviors (e.g., impulsivity, hyperactivity, disruptiveness) in class. Similarly, a reason for under-identification of LDs among girls was due to a lower sign of 'objective' behaviors as a reason for referral to special services. Another possibility, from a social perspective, is the different social expectations expected by boys and girls, such that society sets higher standards of achievement for boys than girls [10, 37]. The subjectivity in referral for special education services due in part to the lack of gold standard for LD referral and identification, leads to inaccurate identification of LDs in students, and creates increased social psychological risks and lowered academic expectations for both boys and girls.

8. Inequalities of class and LDs

Another source of inequality is the occurrence of LDs among students due to social class. Students with LDs were found to have similar behaviors and academic outcomes compared to students from a lower socioeconomic class [10, 38]. Students from such social backgrounds attributed achievement gaps to prenatal factors, malnutrition, parenting style differences, and deprivation of sensory and stimulating environments [10]. Historical and contemporary evidence suggests that the achievement gap used to identify LDs among students can be explained in part due to students' lower social class and being economically disadvantaged compared to their peers [10]. In this sense, the LD label, then, is used to explain lower achievement as a result of incompetent parents and low social position, all social factors that are systemic and out of the control in being able to support the students.

Students who develop in lower socioeconomic environments are exposed to reduced linguistic input in the home environment and can be behind in their language development when they enter school, which subsequently can interfere with their reading and numeracy skills [39]. Evidence has shown that early interventions targeting reading, writing, and numeracy skills remedied the achievement gap typically found in students from a lower socioeconomic class [1, 40]. Therefore, from this social perspective, the achievement gap experienced by students who are from lower socioeconomic class that are considered to have a LD can be understood as societal inequities due to lack of opportunities and resources in developing their reading, numeracy, and writing skills. If the mechanisms of students with LD are in fact having achievement gaps due to a lack of opportunities and resources in their lower socioeconomic home environment, then this calls into question the need for teachers to provide adequate and responsive support for their diverse students who may lack the resources in their home environment.

9. Intersectional identities in LD identification

In United States, there is a history of racism and persisting racial stratification that leads students of color to have less educated parents, lower levels of family income, and decreased access towards resources in the dominant culture (i.e., Caucasian culture) [41]. In this manner, students of color experience increased risks due to their lower class, including cardiovascular disease, arthritis, diabetes, and mental illness, all of which disproportionately diagnose them as having LD, though

the achievement gap may not be due to a lack of learning ability but societal influences [10, 41]. Similar achievement gaps and disproportionality was found from Canadian data [42]. There is some burgeoning literature that have begin to find intersectional relationships, such as between culture and class disadvantage, being a key contributor to heightened risk in being misidentified as having a LD.

With an understanding of the inequities faced by students who are ethnically-racially diverse, of lower socioeconomic class, and both boys (over-identification) and girls (under-identification), there are several studies that have begun to look at the intersections of several of the aforementioned identities. However, studies examining intersections of students with LDs and their identities appear to be primarily focused on cultural and linguistic diverse (CLD) students commonly tied with their lower social class [10, 26]. Evidence continues to show that students coming from a lower social class and are an ethnic-racial minority are more likely to be identified as having a LD compared to Caucasian students from middle-to-higher social class [9, 43]. For example, students who are learning English can have decreased achievement scores, not due to difficulties in their learning but their linguistic barriers preventing them from accurately responding to assessment [26]. Both academic and social-psychological outcomes vary according to students' intersectional identities (i.e., ethnic-racial, linguistic, socioeconomic, sex, disability) [44].

As discussed above, each group of students experience risks associated with inequitable LD referral and identification, due to the achievement gaps used as a method of diagnosis in the three cognitive models. However, culture, language, social class, and sex were all identities and groups shown to experience inappropriate LD referral and identification. This can be understood as a reflection of the inequitable access to effective and responsive educational practices along with complex and societal inequities (i.e., achievement gap, LD identification) and biased perceptions from the teacher (i.e., LD referral) [10, 40]. Particularly as students of color are more prevalent in the lower social class [45], they are at a higher risk for being identified as having a LD, whereas such students may simply require appropriate and responsive instruction by the teacher. This risk would be even more heightened for boys (or students who exhibit more problematic behaviors in classrooms) due to their excessive referrals for LD identification [10, 37].

Though students who are learning English are a heterogeneous population in terms of sociocultural background, the lack of precision in LD identification to discriminate between neurobiological deficits and societal barriers leads to learning difficulties or systemic barriers and inequities that result in decreased achievement scores [10, 13, 26]. In addition to misidentification of LDs based on inaccurate achievement scores as a result of language and systemic barriers (e.g., socioeconomic disadvantaged environments), another layer of inequity is the biased referral towards both male and female students. The subjective referral for special education services based on problematic behaviors predominantly exhibited by male students poses an additional layer of inequity. Though LD referral and identification may be beneficial for some students to be qualified for additional support, the over-identification of male students and under-identification of female students for special education services call attention to social inequities that prevent students from appropriate learning opportunities. At the intersection of sex, one questions whether biased referrals similarly persist when taking into account diverse gender identities as biased LD referrals were based in problematic behaviors.

This leads to questions surrounding the purpose of LD identification and its intended nature. Should schools want to support students from diverse cultural, ethnic-racial, and social class backgrounds, rather than understanding the identification process of LDs in students that bar students from accessing additional

educational support, a culturally responsive RTI model can be a model for teachers to provide effective and responsive instruction that supports all diverse students.

10. Moving forward

As our contemporary society is increasingly responsive to our diverse students' needs and identities, it is critical to understand how the educational system is supporting diverse students. Though LD identification allows for access to special education services, evidence shows risks associated with LD identification, such as lowered academic expectations, peer stigmatization due to special education placement (in addition to pre-existing stigmatization as a result of ethnic-racial minority identities), and lowered self-esteem among other social–emotional outcomes [10, 43, 46]. Based on the many inequities experienced by the disproportionate number of students labeled with LDs due to their intersectional identities of class, culture, race/ethnicity, and sex, research has indicated several points to move forward to better support such marginalized students.

Particularly for students of color who were diagnosed with LDs, they mentioned the importance of teacher support, availability of school counselors, additional programs, and the importance of connection between school and family to support their educational outcomes [28].

Student perspectives reported that they benefitted from flexible pedagogical and adaptive instructional choices that were responsive to their needs [28]. However, students reported that responsive instruction depended primarily on teachers' abilities to prepare and effectively communicate their curriculum that is responsive to their students' needs [28]. In this sense, this can be understood as evidence of LDs as the lack of appropriate instruction responsible by the school and teachers, as opposed to the labelling of students as having low achievement. In this sense, a culturally relevant RTI may be appropriate in having teachers provide responsive instruction that is mindful of their students' diverse needs, including their intersectional identities.

Another component of responsive instruction that aligns with a culturally responsive RTI would be individualized supports [28]. Students reported individualized supports as beneficial for students to work at their own pace without having to keep up with the rest of the class. However, this same logic does not apply to putting students with LD into special education placement due to the lowered expectations and stigmatization placed onto students with LDs by being taken out of general education classrooms [28]. As such, this reiterates the onus placed onto the teacher to be able to create individualized support opportunities for students to work at their own pace, rather than taking them out of general education classrooms, which can lead to lowered academic expectations and increased social psychological risks.

Aligned with a culturally responsive RTI, students reported key adults that were supportive in their educational journey. School counselors were mentioned as instrumental in supporting students with their needs and also acted as a medium to advocate for additional support for students as well as providing emotional and behavioral support as students of color, in particular, were afraid to upset or hurt their family to speak about their academic struggles [28]. This is indicative that helping students manage conflicts with their peers and personal problems with their family. In other words, the additional support students with LDs required can be understood as simply additional supports that all students require due to diverse, cultural needs. For example, evidence has shown that students from low socio-economic class and from minority cultures require additional support to respond

to both their academic and socioemotional needs [10, 43, 46]. As such, school counselors is not only a support system that is beneficial for students with LDs, but responds to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Additionally, school counselors need to be mindful to not be disproportionate to boys due to the more apparent behaviors as this can under-identify the needs of girls from a lower socioeconomic status and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Lastly, as the social model of disability focuses on understanding the societal factors that influence the students' abilities to perform adequately along with their peers [6, 8], students brought up the importance of understanding school and family connections and how schools should be receptive to parental input and encourage collaboration and engagement between school and family [28]. Such communication, such as through online platforms, can facilitate parental contact with schools and promote family support, fostering a sense of family belonging for the student in their school environment. The important point is to foster this two-way street for home-school communication to maximize student support. This underlies general principles of culturally responsive RTI, such that a systemic view of support, bringing in family and multiple stakeholders, will be present to respond to the needs of students with diverse cultural and linguistic needs [19, 20]. Given that a tenet of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) is to formalize family support to foster dialog and collaboration in supporting students' needs. An important focus here is that such home-school collaborations can ensure accountability in maintaining high expectations placed upon all students, and not only students who have been identified with the LD label. IDEIA and a culturally responsive RTI are frameworks that are not only focused on students with LD and, therefore, questions the need for the subjective notion of LD identification, and focus on a broader sense of providing adequate instruction that is responsive to culturally and linguistically diverse students [19, 20], rather than base LD identification on cognitive measures that can be subjectively biased [10, 37].

Providing universal support that is culturally responsive to all students, regardless of LD identification, is effective to remedy the achievement gaps that are present as a result of social inequities. The over-representation of culturally diverse students, including ethnic-racial minorities from lower social class as well as boys, in special education placements brings up an issue in the educational system and the inequitable dilemma: low achievement, negative stigmatization, school drop-outs, academic gaps are all outcomes pertaining to such diverse students particularly those being identified as having a LD [40, 47].

11. Conclusions

An examination of literature surrounding LD referral and identification revealed existing inequities in the educational system for students of intersecting identities, including students considered to be cultural and linguistic minorities, low socioeconomic class, and boys. Though the purpose of assigning LDs to students is to provide a process in which students with LDs can have access to special education services, much of the literature has reported negative consequences for students identified with LDs: low academic expectations, peer stigmatization (due to their special education placement, along with other marginalized identities), low self-esteem, school drop-out. As such, rather than focusing on LD referral and identification that may increase their academic and psychosocial risks, focusing on a culturally responsive RTI model can be a promising method in which all students, regardless of LD identification, can have both academic (e.g., increased academic engagement, achievement) and social benefits (e.g., positive classroom climate,

increased belongingness to classroom) [48–50]. Future research is needed to increase the number of studies exploring intersectional students' experiences with the LD label. As diversity and inclusion is an increasingly important topic in the current society, it is critical for equity researchers to understand and problem solve the inequities that exist to prevent students from non-dominant cultures to prosper alongside their peers.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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