

## Speech/Language Impairment or Specific Learning Disability? Explaining the Shift in Educational Labels

**Research Question and Rationale:** The terminology used to describe children with language difficulties is highly variable within and across the research, clinical, and educational sectors. In the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, there are two educational labels with considerable definitional overlap that can be assigned to children with language difficulties: (1) speech or language impairment (S/LI), or (2) specific learning disability (SLD). The result of this ambiguity is that children with language difficulties often receive one or both of these labels, or “transition” from one label to another (Sun & Wallach, 2014). In this work, we examined the use of these labels in educational practice, particularly investigating the effect of age on the likelihood of a child receiving an S/LI or an SLD label.

**Methods:** We analyzed publicly available data released by the U.S. Department of Education under *IDEA* Section 618, which included the educational labels of children with disabilities, aged 3 through 21, who received special education and related services under *IDEA*. We included nationwide data from the 2010-11, 2011-12, 2016-17, and 2017-18 school years, as well as state-level data from 2011-12. We then examined the assignment of the S/LI and SLD labels across ages at the aggregate national level and within individual states. If there was a shift from a greater number of children with S/LI to a greater number with SLD as age increased, the mean age of this shift was calculated for the U.S. as a whole and for each individual state.

**Results:** At the nationwide level, we found that across all four years, a virtually identical pattern emerged: up until around age 9, more children receive the S/LI label than the SLD label. However, around age 9, the prevalence shifts, with more children receiving SLD than S/LI (Figure 1). This trend is robust and consistent across years.

For almost all states, there is a clear trend in that the use of the S/LI label decreases as the use of SLD increases, with a clear crossing point around age 9 (Figure 2). The glaring exception to this is the state of Iowa, in which the prevalence of S/LI hovers around 8.6% of all disabilities and that of SLD around 60.4% of all disabilities across all ages. There is no clear reason why this would be the case epidemiologically, so this discrepancy is likely due to Iowa school systems assigning the S/LI and SLD labels using different evaluation criteria than the majority of U.S. states. Across the 49 remaining states, the mean age of shift was 8.81, with a median age of 8.68. Values of the age of shift ranged from 6.45 to 10.58.

**Implications:** These findings reveal a robust trend in the use of educational diagnostic labels involving a shift from the use of S/LI in younger children to SLD in older children. The age at which this shift occurs varies considerably from state to state, and is completely absent in Iowa, indicating inconsistencies in the use of educational terminology. It is crucial to note that this terminological shift is not indicative of a shift in underlying deficit or true diagnosis. Children who are labeled S/LI early on may undergo treatment and seem to improve in language skills, only to later be identified as SLD when the language demands of the classroom increase. This means that children who require continued language services may go through periods of receiving little to no support. These findings highlight the importance of accurate, descriptive, and consistent terminology to describe children with language difficulties.

## Figures

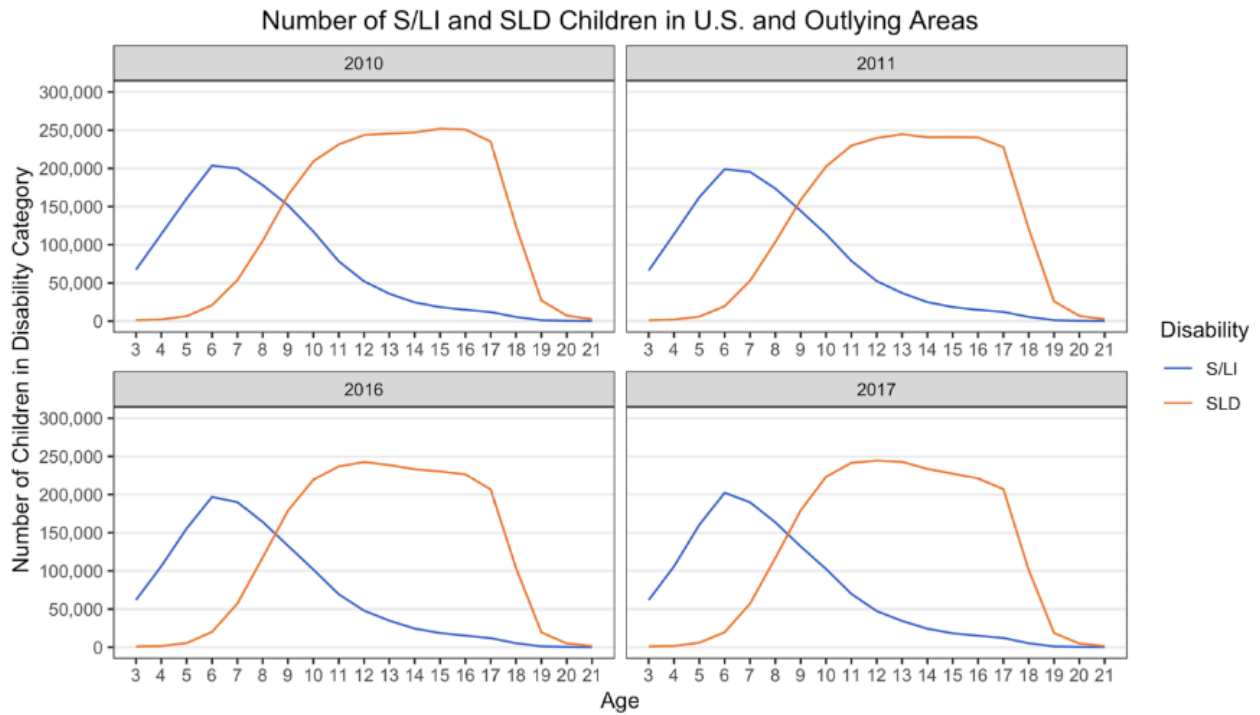


Figure 1. Number of children in the U.S. and outlying areas serviced under *IDEA* with S/LI (blue) and SLD (orange) by age for the 2010-11, 2011-12, 2016-17, and 2017-18 school years.



Figure 2. Proportion of children in the 50 states serviced under *IDEA* with S/LI (blue) and SLD (orange) by age for the 2011-12 school year.

## References

Sun, L., and Wallach, G. P. (2014). Language Disorders *Are* Learning Disabilities: Challenges on the Divergent and Diverse Paths to Language Learning Disability. *Topics in Language Disorders, 34*(1), 25-38.