

# CHAPTER 1

## UNDERSTANDING INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

### CHAPTER OUTLINE

Core Concepts  
Historical Perspectives  
Disciplines and Professions  
    Disciplinary Perspectives and Contributions  
    Terminology  
    Contributions of Biological and Medical Sciences  
    Contribution of the Behavioral Sciences  
    Contributions of Education  
    Disciplinary Collaboration  
Concepts, Definitions, and Classifications  
Intellectual disabilities as a Concept  
Intellectual disabilities: A Definition in Transition  
Incidence and Prevalence  
Classification  
Cross-categorical Issues  
Purposes and Uses of Definitions and Classifications  
    Criterion-Referenced versus Norm-Referenced Measurement  
    Labeling  
New Issues and Future Directions  
Core Questions  
Round-Table Discussion  
References

### CORE CONCEPTS

- The concept of intellectual disabilities is continually influenced by economic, societal, and situational factors.
- People with intellectual disabilities often need services and supports from many different professionals.
- No single discipline has the breadth and depth of expertise and resources necessary to fully provide for people who have intellectual disabilities.
- The term intellectual disabilities encompasses a wide range of characteristics; it is both a label of fact and a label of conjecture.
- The medical profession has had a long history of involvement in the field of intellectual disabilities.
- Many behavioral sciences, particularly psychology, have been concerned with intellectual disabilities.
- Education has been integrally involved with the challenges associated with intellectual disabilities.

- To better support individuals with intellectual disabilities, professionals must coordinate efforts and involve the family.
- Serving children in an inclusive educational setting emphasizes the need for collaboration among professionals.
- The concept of intellectual disability is made more complex because the varying professions that deal with it hold widely divergent viewpoints.
- The 2002 American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR) definition employs intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior.
- It is important to distinguish between incidence and prevalence and to consider other factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES), severity, and age, when determining how frequently intellectual disabilities occurs.
- Multiple classification systems are used by the 2002 AAMR definition document to address grouping individuals by (a) service reimbursement or funding, (b) research services, and (c) communication about selected characteristics. These classification systems are based, for example, “on the intensities of needed supports, etiology, levels of measured intelligence, or levels of assessed adaptive behavior” (AAMR, 2002, p. 99)
- Cross-categorical definition and classification models have emerged because conventional categories are not always effective and functional.
- The purposes and uses of definition and classification schemes must be considered and related to assessment procedures employed and to the impact of labels.
- A number of cultural changes between and within the professions are needed to enhance collaboration on challenges of those with disabilities.
- New issues and future directions in the definition and classification of intellectual disabilities may include a better balance between individual and environmental factors.

## SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Assign the class the task of identifying examples of interdisciplinary cooperation.
2. Provide time in class for reports and a discussion on what motivated the collaboration. Conversely, have students identify examples of specific incidents that demonstrate a lack of interdisciplinary cooperation. Again, allow for reports of such incidents and guide a discussion on how the reported incident could have been better handled to promote a cooperative interaction.
3. Using the text and other sources, have the students trace the changing attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities.
4. Taking a developmental stage approach, have the students discuss particular stages in which various disciplines are central in the core delivery system for those with intellectual disabilities. Have them also identify disciplines or fields of study that are secondary contributors at each developmental level.
5. Using the Core Questions at the end of the chapter, divide the class into groups with each group being assigned a question. Have each discuss thoroughly the assigned question and select one individual to report the outcome of the discussion to full class.
6. Using the Round-Table Discussion material at the end of the chapter divide the class into groups with each group being assigned a disciplinary perspective (e.g., psychology, education, politics). Have each discuss thoroughly the phenomenon of mental retardation with respect to labeling and select one individual to report the outcome of the discussion to full class.
7. Using the material in the chapter and volumes available in the library, have the class thoroughly research background on definitions and classification systems of mental retardation. Divide the class into groups that focus on traditional systems that are currently used (or those from other countries versus those of the United States). Have the groups select debate teams or individuals to argue the case for their assigned position before the class.
8. After thoroughly reviewing all available material on definitions and classification systems, have students develop in writing their own scheme for conceptualizing mental retardation. These schemes should include rationales for each component, the general perspective of the scheme, and logical cases as to why it might be preferable to existing approaches.
9. After reading the material in this chapter, have students consult material available in the library on labeling and the self-fulfilling prophecy and then prepare a short paper (5 to 10 pages) examining the pros and cons of labeling. An alternative to the paper could involve groups debating the issues of labeling.