

# Demystifying Psychoeducational Assessments

**Beth Pollock, Ph.D., C.Psych.**  
**Clinical Director, RARC**

Lunch and Learn Summer Series  
2023



# Outline

- Overview of ARCs
- Services provided by ARCs
  - Transition
  - Assessment
  - Research
  - Training
- Psychoeducational Assessment
  - Diagnosis of High Incidence Disabilities (LDs and ADHD)
  - What should be included in the report?
  - How the information can be used
- Questions



# Overview of ARCs



NOARC/CÉRNO



# Assessment Resource Centres (ARCs)

In 1997, the Ontario government created a Learning Opportunities Task Force (LOTF) to:

- investigate the status of post-secondary students with learning disabilities
- to make recommendations that would enhance access and services for students with specific learning disabilities.

The final report, submitted to the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) in 2002, contained 7 key findings and 24 recommendations. One of the key findings was that:

*"A significant majority of the students arrived at (post-secondary) institutions with no, or at best **inadequate, diagnostic information**. As a result, students had **neither appropriate documentation nor an understanding of their own learning disabilities**. A comprehensive, up-to-date diagnostic assessment is essential for the provision of requisite supports, services, programs and accommodations for students with learning disabilities."*

Learning Opportunities Task Force, 1997 to 2002, Final Report

# Assessment Resource Centres (ARCs)

## 2 ARCs in Ontario

1. **Northern Ontario Assessment Resource Centre (NOARC)** housed at Cambrian College, Sudbury, Ontario
  - Covers Northern Ontario
  - Includes all publicly-funded PSEs north of Ottawa and Barrie
1. **Regional Assessment Resource Centre (RARC)** housed at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario
  - Covers Southern Ontario
  - Includes all publicly-funded PSEs south of Ottawa and Barrie

## +1 CFERO

- Launched in 2014, housed at Collège Boréal, Sudbury, Ontario.
- Provides French language assessments
- Includes PSEs located in Northern Ontario or in one of the regions served by Collège Boréal.



# Assessment Resource Centres (ARCs)

- Since opening their doors, the ARCs have expanded their mandate to include students with other neurodevelopmental disorders.
- Services focus on supporting incoming and current post-secondary students with neurodevelopmental disorders to help them understand and mitigate the impact of functional impairments in an academic context.



# Regional Assessment Resource Centre (RARC)

*RARC is a Centre of Excellence housing clinical psychologists, educators, transition specialists and researchers.*

**Services provided under 4 pillars:**



**Transition**



**Research**



**Training**



**Assessment**

# Learning Disabilities





# Learning Disabilities (LDs)

The DSM-5 and Learning Disabilities Association criteria look for the following:

- At least Average thinking/reasoning abilities
- History of academic achievement issues
- Below Average academic achievement in one or more areas (i.e., reading, writing, math)
- Difficulties in reading, writing, or math are logically connected to deficits in cognitive processes
- The difficulties are not primarily explained by other factors (e.g., other disorders, insufficient effort, poor instruction, linguistic diversity)



# Signs of a Learning Disability ... Reading

Reading Skill	Example
Basic letter knowledge	Identify letters of the alphabet Produce sounds for letters of the alphabet
Word decoding	Read/say/sound out new words or made-up words
Word identification	Read/say/sound out common, familiar words
Fluency	Read with flow and speed, silently or out loud
Comprehension	Answer questions, on paper or aloud, about what they have read.
<b>Signs of Difficulty or Possible LD in reading:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Struggle to read new vocabulary, have poor sight vocabulary for familiar, high frequency words</li><li>• Read in a monotone or read very slowly or with big pauses</li><li>• Limited understanding of what they read</li><li>• Avoid reading in leisure time</li><li>• Avoid reading out loud</li><li>• Mistake words for similar words</li><li>• Not sure what test questions are asking or what assignments instructions mean</li></ul>	

# Signs of a Learning Disability ... Writing

Writing Skill	Example
Production of letters	Write the alphabet
Sound-symbol knowledge and understanding of basic word structure	Write the correct letter for different sounds
Spelling	Produce orally presented words
Sentence Composition	Write sentences using appropriate punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure
Writing Fluency	Quickly generate and produce sentences
Essay Writing	Organize ideas into writing using an appropriate structure
<b>Signs of Difficulty or Possible LD in writing:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letter reversals (b for d, p for q)</li> <li>• Using limited vocabulary in writing pieces</li> <li>• Avoiding writing activities</li> <li>• Providing better oral answers than written answers</li> <li>• Spelling words how they sound (e.g., “menchin” for “mention”), spells same word several different ways in one paragraph</li> <li>• Slow copying information from a blackboard/whiteboard</li> <li>• Written work requires a lot of editing for spelling, grammar, sentence structure</li> <li>• Run-on sentences, poor use of commas, periods and capitalization</li> </ul>	

# Signs of a Learning Disability ... Mathematics

Mathematics	Example
Fluency	rapid recall of basic math facts from memory
Calculation	working out numerical calculations
Applied Problem Solving	applying basic math skills to solve real-world oriented problems
<b>Signs of Difficulty or Possible LD in mathematics:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lose track when counting</li><li>• Use fingers as aids for simple calculations</li><li>• Struggle to estimate number of items in a group</li><li>• Poor sense of relative size of numbers</li><li>• Struggle to understand graphs</li><li>• Difficulty counting money or making change</li><li>• Forget or mix up steps in math problems</li><li>• Poor understanding of fractions</li><li>• Avoid math-based activities</li><li>• Poor sense of when calculator has produced a wrong answer</li></ul>	

# Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)





# AD/HD – WHAT IS IT?

- **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD)** is the current term for a specific **neurodevelopmental disorder** seen in both children and adults that is comprised of **deficits in attention, behavioural inhibition, and the regulation of activity**.
- ADHD is characterized by developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, that impair a person's functioning.
- Some individuals have problems with all three types of symptoms, whereas others have problems primarily with inattention, or primarily with hyperactivity/impulsivity.
- According to Russell Barkley, a leading researcher within the field of ADHD, the **predominant features** of this disorder include:
  - **Poor sustained attention or persistence of effort to tasks**
  - **Impaired response inhibition, impulse control, or the capacity to delay gratification**
  - **Excessive task irrelevant activity or activity that is poorly regulated to the demands of a situation.**

# DSM-5: INATTENTIVE SYMPTOMS

- Often fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, at work, or during other activities
- Often has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities
- Often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly
- Often does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace
- Often has difficulty organizing tasks and activities
- Often avoids, dislikes, or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort
- Often loses things necessary for tasks or activities
- Is often easily distracted by extraneous stimuli
- Is often forgetful in daily activities



# DSM-5: HYPERACTIVE-IMPULSIVE SYMPTOMS

- Often fidgets with or taps hands or feet or squirms in seat
- Often leaves seat in situations when remaining seated is expected
- Often runs about or climbs in situations where it is inappropriate
- Often unable to play or engage in leisure activities quietly
- Is often “on the go,” acting as if “driven by a motor”
- Often talks excessively
- Often blurts out an answer before a question has been completed
- Often has difficulty waiting his or her turn
- Often interrupts or intrudes on others



# Only Symptoms?

- Symptoms are 1 criteria, but must also have:
- Chronicity- evidence before 12
- Pervasiveness- evident across environments
- Clinical significance- causes impairment

Also....

- Other factors that may “mimic” symptoms need to be ruled out





# Psychoeducational Assessments







# Assessments: Purpose & Timing

## Psychoeducational Assessments

- Determine factors underlying unexpected academic underachievement
- Identify areas of strength and need
- Can be conducted at any age
- However, provide only a “snapshot” of current functioning
- Particularly important to obtain up-to-date information prior to transitions to assist with planning

# Psychoeducational Assessments

- Starts with a clear referral question
- **Background section should include:**
  - Review of documentation including report cards, previous assessment reports, Individual Education Plans (IEPs), etc.
  - Clinical interview, including
    - Medical/Developmental
    - Family/Social
    - Academic/Employment
    - Behavioural/Psychological



# Psychoeducational Assessments

- Administration of psychometric measures of:
  - Overall ability
  - Cognitive processes related to learning
  - Academic achievement
  - Behavioural functioning
  - Psychological functioning
  - Study skills/work habits
  - Additional areas as needed



# Psychoeducational Assessments

- A summary report outlining:
  - Functioning in various cognitive and academic areas assessed
  - Descriptions of findings from behavioural and psychological measures
  - Clinical implications of findings
  - Accommodations, interventions, and supports warranted
- A meeting with the student and/or family/advocate/PSE personnel to discuss the findings



# Assessments: Benefits For Transitions

- **Rule in/rule out** various factors that may be impeding academic success
- Helps students understand their **strengths and weaknesses** as a learner
- Determines **functional limitations**
- **Ensures accommodations and supports address functional limitations** arising from the student's diagnosed disability
- Provides guidance on appropriate **interventions and supports to address malleable factors**
- Provides **documentation** required by post-secondary institutions to provide formal accommodations (needs to be within 5 (3) years of attending PSE)



# Questions?



# Thank You!

**Regional Assessment and Resource Center (RARC):** [www.queensu.ca/rarc](http://www.queensu.ca/rarc)

Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario Canada

Beth Pollock, Clinical Director (RARC) : [beth.pollock@queensu.ca](mailto:beth.pollock@queensu.ca)

## Connect with RARC:



rarc@queensu.ca



[www.queensu.ca/rarc](http://www.queensu.ca/rarc)



613-533-6311



Mackintosh-Corry Hall,  
B100  
68 University Avenue  
Kingston, Ontario, Canada  
K7L 3N6

