Letter of Intent:
Determining and Addressing the Counselling Needs of
Students with Learning Disabilities
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Determining and Addressing the Counselling Needs of Students with Learning Disabilities

The current letter of intent proposes a comprehensive literature review on the psychological needs of students with learning disabilities. The proposed literature review will include an examination of the means of addressing these unique needs in a counselling context. Research questions, project rationale, methodological procedures and implications for the project are outlined. The terms ‘learning disabilities’, ‘learning difficulties’, ‘learning problems’ and ‘learning disorders’ will be used interchangeably throughout.

Overview

Problem Statement

According to the literature, mental health issues among students with learning disabilities is reportedly four to five times greater than that of the general population (Einfeld & Tonge, 1996). In spite of the prevalence of poor mental health among those with learning issues, the emotional needs of this population has been a neglected area of research (Arthur, 2003; Hassoitis, Baron & O’Hara, 2000; Reed, 1997). As a result, the interaction between learning disabilities and mental health is not well-understood (Raghavan & Patel, 2005), which has a direct impact on the mental health services available to this population. Popular interventions for those with concurrent mental health problems and learning disorders generally employ behavioural strategies aimed at altering behaviours that are problematic to others (Lindsay, 1999) and treat the symptoms, not the underlying problems (Williams & Helsop, 2005). As a result, it is important to focus on the needs of learning disabled students in order to address the core
issues and improve their lives. The proposed literature review will shed light on this phenomenon to ultimately assist parents and professionals in meeting the needs of these individuals.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the literature review:

1. What are the emotional/psychological needs of youth with learning disabilities?
2. How are these needs addressed in a counselling context (e.g., school and private setting)?
3. How does a holistic model attempt to address the psychological needs of school-aged youth with learning disabilities?

Rationale

The term ‘Learning Disabilities’ refers to a range of disorders that could potentially “affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning.” (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAC], 2002, ¶ 1). This definition differentiates learning disabilities from global intellectual deficiency and underachievement, which are separate and distinct issues from learning disorders (Fletcher, Francis, Rourke, Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 1993). Individuals with learning disorders often display uneven abilities, where they struggle in some areas of learning and do well in others (Mather & Gregg, 2006). One of the misconceptions about learning disabilities is the idea that they are a phase of development that may be outgrown (Shaywitz, 2003). Learning disabilities endure into adulthood, where the psychological problems associated with learning
difficulties are not limited to school performance and academic settings but extend to other areas of life (Mather & Gregg).

According to the literature, internalizing problems are common among youth with learning disabilities (Cummings, Vallance & Brazil, 1992). In particular, depression is the most prevalent mental health issue within this population (Huntington & Bender, 1993; Raghavan & Patel, 2005). Other issues frequently associated with learning difficulties include: anxiety (Cummings et al., 1992; Fisher, Allen & Kose, 1996), low self-esteem (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001) and alienation and loneliness (Greenham, 1999; Margalit & Efrati, 1996). It is believed that the mental health issues outlined above emerge as a secondary disability among those with learning difficulties (Hernandez-Halton, Hodges, Miller & Simpson, 2000). For example, students with learning disorders may be more likely to experience loneliness and alienation from classmates as they are given lower-status approval ratings by their peers (Greenham, 1999). Learning disabled individuals may serve as a “receptacle for other people’s projected feelings of limitation, rejection and other unwanted negative emotions” (Hernandez-Halton et al., 2000, p. 124).

While a consensus on the number of students with learning disorders experiencing mental health issues has not been reached, there has been some agreement in the literature that a higher prevalence of mental health issues exists among those with learning disabilities (Hassoitis et al., 2000; McCarthy & Boyd, 2002; Prosser, 1999). Specifically, Einfeld and Tonge (1996) reported a 40-50% rate of psychopathology in youth with learning disorders. This would suggest that up to half of all young people with learning disabilities experience mental health issues to some extent. As a result, those with both learning issues and mental health problems are considered a vulnerable population.
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(Hassoitis et al.). Unfortunately, mental health service provision for this group is poor (Hassoitis et al.) and as a result, these individuals comprise an excluded and marginalized segment of society (Smith, 1999). Increased attention paid to mental health among those with learning disabilities is an important step in improving available services and the quality of life of these individuals. Making current, relevant information available on the nature of mental health issues experienced by those with learning difficulties, will help facilitate this process.

Procedure

The proposed literature review will examine the psychological needs of youth with learning disabilities and how these needs are addressed in a counselling context. Research of original peer-reviewed journal articles will be conducted using the following electronic databases: PsycINFO, Academic search premier, Child development and adolescent studies, Psychology and behavioural sciences collection, PsycARTICLES, PsychLIT and ERIC. The descriptors to be used include: learning disabilities, LD, intellectual disabilities, mental health, emotion, counsel(l)ing, and psychotherapy. The proposed research will be limited to articles published from 1985-present in English and French language publications, with the exception of original/pioneering articles in this subject area. In addition, I will draw from the wealth of knowledge and experience afforded by my supervisor.

The review of literature will be compiled into a succinct pamphlet, providing an overview of the psychological needs of students with learning disabilities as well as appropriate counselling interventions. This pamphlet is intended for use in counselling offices in schools, community agencies and private practice. However, it is the author’s
intention that the information supplied within the pamphlet will also be beneficial for parents and teachers of individuals who have learning disabilities. In this sense, the pamphlet may be helpful in presenting some background information on the unique emotional needs and supportive treatments relative to this population.

*Potential Implications*

The proposed review of existing research will benefit students, teachers, parents and counsellors by highlighting specific mental health issues experienced by young people with learning disabilities. This information coupled with the examination of existing research on how to effectively intervene with this population will allow professionals working with students to provide support, reduce harm and improve psychological outcomes for this vulnerable population. In addition, the information gained from this project may serve to educate the public about young people’s psychological needs as well as identify areas for future research.
References


