INTERDISCIPLINARY SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS (IEPs) FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

By

LORI ANTIFAVE

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ABSTRACT

Title:
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Author:
Lori Antifave

Supervisor:
Dr. Mike Gismondi

Interdisciplinary training is necessary for School Based Teams (SBTs) to write individual education plans (IEPs) that support students with learning disabilities. This paper integrates three philosophies: the educational philosophy of the special education teacher, the psychological philosophy, and the philosophy of the classroom teacher. Assistive technology is included in the special education teacher philosophy. Learning disabilities have become more integrated in the twenty-first century. Therefore, collaboration between school counselors, assistive technology experts, psychologists, special education teachers, classroom teachers, administration and family must occur. The research revealed that IEP planning remains in the past. IEPs do not reflect the changes in technology support in the twenty-first century. A lack of funding prevents SBTs from collaborating to implement integration in IEPs. In conclusion, this paper recognizes that SBTs benefit from an interdisciplinary model, but that integration will not be achieved without interdisciplinary training and funding to support collaboration. The objective of this paper is to increase the understanding of interdisciplinarity in IEPs.
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Step 1. State the problem or focus question.

Special education goals should be integrated into individual education plans (IEPs) in interdisciplinary ways, as well as into the regular classroom education of a student with learning disabilities.

School based teams trained in interdisciplinary special education teaching and research are relevant to professionals in education who are interested in improving student academic success through. Introducing interdisciplinarity into special education would include refashioning a student’s individual education program (IEP) in interdisciplinary ways, and integrating a student’s program and regular classroom education. My research hypothesis has been influenced by my experiences as a support teacher for sixteen years. I have witnessed negative stereotypes from “the loser room” to “retards” and how these stereotypes have affected students with learning disabilities. In this paper, I am challenging those and attempting to eliminate such stereotypes by presenting research that suggests otherwise. For example, Palys and Atchison argue that most learners can become competent individuals in academics with individual teaching supports: “A valuable role of research is to help refute or confirm our beliefs about social “facts,” assuming we believe that truth is a priority and that important social decisions should be based on evidence rather than on speculation or stereotyping” (2008:38). 

IEPs developed using an interdisciplinary model that integrates provisions for students with learning disabilities in their IEP, and are also integrated into the regular classroom, support students with learning disabilities to achieve academic success.

The IEP, a legal document that outlines supports for students with learning disabilities, is best defined by Luder et al. (2011:164) as “The Individual Education Plan (IEP) is based on different goals for a child set by the school team; outlines any special support needed to achieve these goals and specifies what support is required and to what extent it will be provided.” There are many unique learning disabilities, each connected to IEPs, and each needs to be specifically researched. A comprehensive definition for learning disabilities is cited by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD:1991) in DaCosta (2007) which reads:

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction. Even
though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance), or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction, psychogenic factors), it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (3)

This paper will examine recent research which focuses on students with learning disabilities, including methods used to facilitate learning.

I will begin with a brief summary of steps one through five from Repko et al. (2012) strategies for interdisciplinary research, as a prelude to understanding the purpose of studying interdisciplinarity in special education. My hypothesis will be developed following a series of steps outlined by Repko in “Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory” who suggests that steps one and two are to develop a research question and justify an interdisciplinary approach. The third step involves evaluating disciplinary insights, and the fourth focuses on finding common ground across disciplinary insights (8).

Step 2. Justify using an interdisciplinary approach.

There has always been a push to integrate special education into mainstream teacher education and practice. IEPs outline learning supports for individual needs: academic, behavior, professional support, and technology for students with a learning disability. The integration of these supports requires continuous and collaborative problem-solving to develop appropriate learning assistance for students, and to implement suitable interventions (IEPs) by school based teams. School based teams develop and revise IEPs. However, there is sometimes a lack of collaboration between teachers and professionals that develop IEPs:

When teachers fail to collaborate to plan supports for students with disabilities, general education teachers may not individualize instruction and may not provide instructional adaptations and accommodations to meet the educational needs of students with disabilities who are in their classes (Carter et. al: 2009, Baker & Zigmond, 1995; Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997; Stockall & Gartin, 2002).

Typically, a psychological assessment is necessary to determine which supports are required to best meet the educational needs of the student:
A formal diagnosis can therefore only be made by a licensed professional. Without a thorough psychological assessment, it is likely that students, teachers, and parents will not truly understand the cause of the child's academic difficulties or know which accommodations are best suited to the needs of the student. (Rosenblum:2010:172)

IEPs are designed by combining assessments conducted by trained psychologists, and medical professionals such as speech pathologists, and others. Educational supports are then determined through collaboration between psychologists, medical professionals, parents, and education professionals. An interdisciplinary lense should help evaluate how to bring together these many disciplinary insights and practices into an integrated set of student supports.

Step 3. Identify relevant disciplines.

This research essay draws from several disciplines that support IEPs: social sciences; psychology, sociology, and political science, and education professionals. An education vocabulary is used because it best explains findings in the context of IEPs.

Step 4. Conduct the literature search.

The literature search used a multidisciplinary approach to developing IEPs. However, a gap exists in research. The benefits of an interdisciplinary school based team model in IEPs are not well studied. The role of interdisciplinarity and integration of special education and regular classrooms is also not well examined. Therefore, I have included a brief summary of each individual discipline relevant to the IEP and related it to my hypothesis: 

*IEPs developed using an interdisciplinary school based team that integrates provisions for students with learning disabilities in their IEP, and into the regular classroom, will provide more and better supports for students with learning disabilities to achieve academic success.* The final parts of the paper “require reflection, testing, and communication of results” to demonstrate the effectiveness of interdisciplinarity in special education (Repko et al.:2012:9).

Step 5. Develop adequacy in each relevant discipline.

Economics is not included in IEP goal development, but remains integral to integration. Economics is the cost of or lack of funding for school based teams and special education teachers that develop IEPs. Cutbacks in public education are common, and learning supports for students
with mild learning disabilities may be referred to as a luxury in schools that have minimal budgets. In British Columbia, students who receive special education funding must be appropriately assessed and identified, and have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in place (BC Ministry of Education:2012). Similar policies exist in other Canadian provinces.

Luder et al. (2011) discusses the politics involved in providing support for students with learning disabilities using IEPs. Luder maintains that controversy currently exists and support for inclusive policies varies. Some do and some do not support IEPs in policy (164). Special education policies protect funding. The issues in this paper provide valuable research to encourage continued funding support for students with learning disabilities.

Sgouros and Walsh (2012) suggest that school psychologists participate in developing IEPs with special educators for students. Sgouros and Walsh assessed the correlation between school psychologists and special educators, and academic achievement in IEP students compared to their peers, “Special education teachers and school psychologists continue to provide frequent and formative assessments that guide instruction and intervention. With data teams, they seek to improve students’ achievement and to close the gap with their peers in general education.” (2012). The students’ psychological well-being requires involvement of a psychologist in designing IEPs within academic goals. Integration of student mental health and psychological well-being into IEP goals would be advantageous.

Wood (1968) assessed multidisciplinary teams for students with learning disabilities in the 20th century and argued that: “Those responsible for training specialists in the education of children with adjustment and learning problems should provide relevant coursework and experiences in team planning as part of their training programs.” (340). Research from the 20th century is relevant because it shows how special education has changed, or not, and reveals the ongoing need to research special education. Our understanding of learning disabilities changes because society changes.

With both interdisciplinarity and technology in mind, current research for developing IEPs must occur because technology is becoming essential support for students with learning disabilities. Provincial governments implement policies that include technological support for
students with learning disabilities; therefore, a need also exists for assistive technology experts on school based teams.

**Step 6. Analyze the problem and evaluate each insight into it.**

The problem with the current IEPs written in British Columbia is the inconsistent collaboration between professionals required to develop IEPs. Collaboration is very important for both multidisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity teams when writing IEPs,

Determining if the student is eligible for special education services is a group decision and should be made at a multidisciplinary team meeting. This meeting should be attended by the parents, special and general education teachers, school administrators, testing professionals, and any other person involved in the referral process. Placement should be determined only after considering all possible placement options (Dildine:2010; Wood:2002).

Administration must agree to funding that releases professionals from their teaching duties for team planning. Successful collaboration requires planning time, effort and administrative support (Carter et al.:2009:60). Classroom teachers, a special education teacher, and other professionals should create a multidisciplinary team to provide education goals for students with learning disabilities. However, these goals are often individualized by discipline, and become abandoned when the regular classroom teacher is not trained to implement the goal (Carter et al.:61:2009):

Teachers have reported that they lack training on how to adapt instruction for students with disabilities, do not have enough time for collaboration, encounter philosophical differences that impede collaborative processes, and lack support for collaboration from their school administration (Edmunds, 2000; Helfin & Bullock, 1999; Kamens, Loprete, & Slostad; 2003; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Stockall & Gartin, 2002; Trent, 1998).

Another concern is that IEPs are not always written by professionals in special education or interdisciplinarity. In British Columbia, and especially in rural schools, a regular classroom teacher is assigned a student with an IEP, and that teacher has considerable input in developing the IEP. This teacher may even write the IEP. A rapport with a student that has a learning disability is beneficial to promote cooperation in classroom learning. However, the regular classroom teacher may not have the professional expertise, or release time, to collaborate with team members from various disciplines to determine the disability and the support needed: “It was also hypothesized that registered, clinical psychologists and psychological associates would provide significantly more comprehensive psychological assessment reports than nonregistered
practitioners.” (Rosenblum et al.:2010:174). *Inconsistent diagnosis leads to the incorrect supports being implemented into IEP goals.* A standard IEP created by a classroom teacher includes an academic goal for each subject, a personal goal, a behavior goal, and a technology goal. In contrast, a more interdisciplinary school based team approach will allow students and teachers to integrate goals across various disciplines.

Multidisciplinary teams write multidisciplinary IEPs, developed by educational goals that are multidisciplinary in composition. There are separate academic goals, and separate behavior goals, “Statements should address academics, life skills, physical functioning, social and behavioral skills, and any other areas of concern affecting the child’s ability to learn.” (Logsdon:2012). Though a multidisciplinary team is preferred by Dildine (2010), and Wood (1969:2002), multidisciplinarity does not address the complex learning disabilities that are emerging in the 21st century. Cognitive deficiencies, behavioral issues, modern technology, and economic factors continue to increase in scope, while IEP planning remains in the past. An interdisciplinary team would have the expertise to perform assessments, plus the ability to create integration within IEP goals through collaboration, and even integrate the student and IEP into the regular classroom.

**Step 7. Identify conflicts between insights and their sources.**

There are three competing models in regard to the development of IEPs. The first is the educational philosophy in which the special education teacher determines what is best for the student and develops an IEP. The second is the psychological philosophy, where the district psychologist determines what is best for the student. Third is the educational philosophy of the classroom teacher develops the IEP individually. None of the models stress the need for the comprehensive and integrated involvement of specialists. Interdisciplinarity argues that it is in fact a prerequisite for best practice.

Different philosophies exist as to how to best address the needs of students with learning disabilities. Understanding interdisciplinarity calls for an understanding of several disciplines that address learning disabilities. Educators may not have the training in each discipline, or may find the task of understanding several disciplines daunting. However, a School Based Team approach could improve their comprehension of different philosophies of learning disabilities. A district psychologist concentrates on the behavior of the student, while an educator concentrates
on the curriculum and methods to learn. A school based counselor concentrates on several aspects that affect student learning. Unfortunately, not all counselors are trained to work with students with learning disabilities, “The most prominent theme to emerge from the qualitative results was that some counselors felt that they lacked adequate training on learning disabilities” (Green:2009:26). Working in teams can help increase awareness among the various counselors of the issues faced by students, psychological, behavioral, school culture and family-life. Interdisciplinary teams can better identify differences in learning and create a common goal to support student learning.

Technology is included in IEP goals to assist student learning in regular classrooms. However, technology is not intended to replace the learner centered approach, “In fact, there is a consequence when the technology-centered approach is adopted over that of the learner-centered one (Mayer: 2005b). Namely, the technology centered approach does not generally lead to long term advancements in education” (DaCosta: 2010; Cuban: 1986; Mayer: 2005b). Classroom teachers argue that technology is a hindrance when it is not followed up by training for the student, and in-service training for the teacher working with the student.

**Step 8. Create or discover common ground.**

This paper suggests that the traditional multidisciplinary model to develop IEPs be revised in favor of the interdisciplinary team based model proposed. More collaboration between professionals, more training in modern technology, and more and different types of learning disabilities creates a set of challenges that call for newly trained interdisciplinary school based support teams. These interdisciplinary teams must work directly with the school to support individual students, classrooms, and whole schools. Current research in favor of inclusive education suggests that the following professionals may participate in the (IEP) meeting: the special needs teacher, therapists, the educational psychologist, the principal - or anyone else who can make an important contribution in the circumstances (Luder et al.:2011:166). Administration must support release time to ensure collaboration takes place in applying the IEP interdisciplinary model.
Romano and Paradise (Nari et al.:2009:15) researched school counselors’ reactions to services for students with special needs, including learning disabilities. Findings indicated that counselors agree with the need for more supports for students with learning disabilities, but that they do not have the in-service training to serve on the school based teams for developing IEPs:

One item (develop academic accommodation plans for students with LD) had an overall means of 3.92 indicating participants slightly disagreed with the appropriateness of this role. Participants’ disagreement with this item follows ASCA’s guidelines that specify it is appropriate for school counselors to assist in the development and implementation of accommodation plans, but they should not serve as the sole supervisor of implementing those plans. (p.18)

Research suggests that a plan or district policy be in place for classroom teachers to be released in order to participate in meetings with professionals from other disciplines to develop IEPs for students with learning disabilities. And, interdisciplinary school teams must have a case manager that specializes in special education to oversee IEP development.

Step 9. Integrate insights.

Woods’ (1969;2002) supports multidisciplinarity when writing IEPs for special education students in his research on integration into the regular classroom, “The best educational placements result from cooperative planning by a multidisciplinary team.” (337). This article from 1969, and current growth of technology in special education, reveals that there is an ongoing call to revise special education IEPs, especially in these technical times in the 21st century, and to integrate aspects of various disciplines and learning supports into the regular classroom.

Classroom teachers access support for students with learning disabilities through IEPs. IEPs are currently developed by multidisciplinary teams. Multidisciplinary teams have served as school based teams for IEPs in the 20th and 21st centuries, outlined by Wood previously, referenced in his 1969 research, and in his 2002 research, “This (the IEP) is completed by a multidisciplinary team, usually consisting of the general education teacher, special education teacher, school psychologist or speech language pathologist, administrator, and other pertinent professionals, as well as the student’s parents/guardians (Wood:2002). The 21st century has seen
extensive growth in technology that supports students with learning disabilities; it is in the foreground of provisions for these students. Therefore, I would propose that assistive technology experts be included as participants on school based teams. Collaboration between these disciplines will generate integrated goals in the IEP language, and further integrate these goals in the regular classroom.

The 21st century special education multidisciplinary team continues to be the School Based Team (SBT). The SBT currently consists of regular classroom teachers, a social worker (specialized in child and youth care), the school counselor, and a district psychologist or community program leaders when applicable or able to be present, and parents or guardians. Most of these teams lack the ability to develop educational plans that integrate the goals within the IEP, so that these goals can be further integrated into the regular classroom. For example, behavior goals are strictly behavior, and measured accordingly, regardless of the academic subject the student is learning. The student will also have an academic goal for one or more core subjects. Could the behavior be related to the subject? Counseling and social worker professionals with interdisciplinary training have the ability to develop integrated goals, and take these goals to the classroom teacher to integrate these goal(s) into the regular classroom. Also, technology enables SBT professionals to develop further supports and deliver effective instruction and interventions without first waiting for students to fail. Supports enable students to be included in classroom learning, “In such cases, use of helps assistive technology helps to promote inclusion. With little technological help, many children with special educational needs, such as learning disabilities as, will be able to participate in participate regular classes.” (Pare: 2102).

It is likely that secondary teachers are not even aware that students with learning disabilities on IEPs are in their class (Foley and Mundschenk:1997). It is for this reason that collaboration and interdisciplinarity reflection between school counselors, assistive technology experts, psychologists, classroom teachers, and special education teachers must occur.

Step 10. Produce an interdisciplinary understanding and test it.

The objective of using an interdisciplinary school based team model is to develop an integrated IEP. After consultation and collaboration with professionals from individual disciplines, and other members involved in developing the education plan, education goals are
integrated in the language in the IEP. When goals are integrated in IEP goals, they then have the benefit of collaboration with different disciplines, and that integration aspect will transfer to student learning in the regular classroom. The IEP can then apply the model of integration in the regular classroom to accommodate individual learning needs. Though this appears a two-step process, it is in fact a type of integration that has existed for years in the regular classroom.

An interdisciplinary approach would gather data on the different variables that improve academic success for students with learning disabilities. Special education teachers that write IEPs, who are educated in interdisciplinarity approaches and familiar with methods and theory across a variety of disciplines, and different philosophies of learning disabilities can better apply knowledge, research, and quality decisions to their individual programs for students with learning disabilities.

Technology has surpassed the IEP student, and teachers not trained in assistive technology are not able to implement or assess IEP goals in a sound educational setting, “Given financial constraints and the variety of training needs and requirements identified in provincial and board policies, it is not easy to ensure that all teachers receive adequate training in the use of new technologies or in new the educational needs of students with disabilities.” (Pare: 2012). For this reason, the IEP goals must include input from individual disciplines for assessment purposes. Refer once again to the example of the integrated goal. The classroom is a setting that allows learning about an academic subject at the same time that a student is applying behavior management skills and technology. Students with learning disabilities are further assisted with integration in the regular classroom. Therefore, the objective of an integrated goal is to develop one goal that integrates two or more disciplines, into the classroom, for the ease of implementation, assessment, and academic achievement in the classroom.

Technology specialists develop supports for IEP students, and would benefit from developing integrated goals in the IEP. Technology is leading the way in supports for students with learning disabilities in the 21st century, as long as the technology is integrated into the IEPs supports. For example, Kurzweil is a software program that assists students with reading text aloud. An IEP goal that integrates Kurzweil with academic achievement would look like this: “Student A will complete the novel study The War Between the Classes using Kurzweil to read the novel aloud. The classroom teacher will assess comprehension based on oral questioning.
and/or written questions as assigned by the teacher. Student A will sit in a quiet setting with headphones to listen to the novel, as well as participate in class reading, listening as required, three times a week. Behavior required is to not distract others or be distracted by others in the class while utilizing Kurzweil. Student A will achieve 60% or greater on assignments that demonstrate the provincial grade eight novel study learning outcomes.” The goal is integrated in that it includes psychology (behavior), academic achievement assessment (course and percentage required to successfully pass), curriculum development (classroom teacher expertise, teaching method), assistive technology (Kurzweil), and a learner-centered approach (oral questioning and participation through class reading/listening).

Explaining interdisciplinary collaboration is significant in developing an IEP at the outcome of the meeting, based on input from the school based team. Integrated goals do not truly emerge when the goal is written by the special education teacher or classroom teacher individually. The IEP does include goals based on collaboration from the multidisciplinary team. However, the psychologist determines the need for behavior goals to achieve academic success, and the education experts will determine what methods best to apply to learning situations for the IEP student and goals. Additional professionals, parents, and administration are included in interdisciplinary IEPs.

Technology assists learning when it is integrated between the student and the classroom teacher, the subject, and the regular classroom. The special education professional must be trained in assistive technology, or collaborate with an assistive technology professional, and determine if assistive technology is required for the IEP student to be included in the general education curriculum (Wehmeyer:2007:141). Academic teams must work together in identifying needs for up-to-date IEP goals. The IEP goal requires approval and assessment by administration, parents or guardians, and professionals that are part of the school based team for that student.

Conclusion

As a special education teacher, I am interested in using an interdisciplinary approach with students with learning disabilities and exploring its relationship to academic success. A positive correlation between using interdisciplinarity to special education with regular education in IEPs will help parents and teachers advocate for government funding for school youth with learning disabilities. In particular, it could increase support for trained special education teachers, regular
classroom educators, technical equipment, education assistants, and resources that support students with learning disabilities. Interdisciplinary research is also necessary to support secondary students that transition to paid work or post-secondary education. Current research suggests that many students with learning disabilities, with IEPs, are lacking skills to be successful post-graduation. The development and implementation of IEPs using an interdisciplinary model would benefit from further research.

References


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Appendix I: Literature Review

Literature has been selected to represent the different discipline genres previously outlined:

