

The Role of the Teacher of Students with Learning Disabilities in the RTI Process

At the core of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed in 2001, is the goal that all children have the opportunity to achieve in school. The law emphasizes the importance of well-prepared professionals, evidence-based practice and accountability. In 2004, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004), aligned with NCLB, and changed the landscape of identification and service delivery for students with disabilities. The long-established policies used by school systems to identify students as being eligible for special education have undergone close scrutiny. Because of concerns about the increase in the number of students being identified as having learning disabilities, the overrepresentation of minority populations and the problems associated with "wait-to-see" discrepancy models, IDEA 2004 expands the options for identifying learning disabilities by permitting school systems to use response to instruction as part of the evaluation process and by not requiring the identification of a significant discrepancy between ability and achievement.

In section 614, the language states that "when determining whether a child has a specific learning disability," a local education agency "shall not be required to take into consideration whether a child has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skill, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation, or mathematical reasoning."

IDEA 2004 continues to define specific learning disability as "a disorder in 1 or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken, or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations." The term includes "conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia." The term does not include "a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage."

Local Education Agencies across the nation are making systemic changes to comply with the mandates of NCLB and IDEA 2004.

Challenges and Opportunities

NCLB and IDEA 2004 provide a special opportunity for positive change in the field of learning disabilities. Most professionals with expertise in learning disabilities agree that an alternative to the use of a rigid IQ-Achievement Discrepancy formula is an important step forward; however, since both NCLB and IDEA 2004 require evidence-based approaches, any alternative procedures used to identify students with Learning Disabilities should have a sufficient base of evidence that demonstrates the efficacy of the procedure for identifying students with Learning Disabilities with maximum accuracy and minimal false positives and negatives. Existing studies indicate RTI is a promising practice but more research is needed to assess its efficacy as a procedure to identify specific learning disabilities.

New and Expanding Roles

The new laws also emphasize the use of evidence-based practice in the general education program prior to evaluation for special education and establish models in which students move through tiers of instruction based on level of need. Some models have 3 levels and others have 4, but all models follow a similar process. The first tiers ensure children receive appropriate instruction initially to minimize identification of students as having Learning Disabilities when the problem may be the result of lack of exposure to appropriate instruction. Then, progress is monitored continuously and a student who is not making expected progress is referred to a RTI Problem Solving team, comprised of well-prepared professionals. The team reviews the data and recommends changes that provide additional support for the student, which may result in the student moving to a more intense level of instruction. Recommendations related to instruction, behavior and/or social-emotional issues are made and implemented in the general education program in the 2nd or 3rd tier, depending on the model being used.

For students who are in the 2nd (or 3rd tiers), instruction is provided in smaller groups and may be more intense, frequent or specialized. Programs that have been shown to remediate skills successfully but that are not typically used for initial instruction may be implemented. Continuous progress monitoring produces data about student progress/needs and decisions about instruction, movement between tiers and programmatic changes continue to be made by the problem solving team.

For students who continue to struggle, the problem solving team may recommend moving the students to the last tier. These students have moved through the general education tiers, and data from continuous progress monitoring identified them as a group of students who are still not responding to instruction and who may, or may not, have specific learning disabilities. At this point, a comprehensive evaluation should be designed and conducted to obtain additional data about cognition, achievement, behavior and/or social-emotional

characteristics to see if a learning disability is present, identify individual student needs and plan remediation. If intelligence data is needed to rule out ability as a factor affecting progress or if the behavioral/social-emotional problems are primary, the school psychologist could conduct an assessment, which would include an intellectual assessment (IQ testing). The specialist in learning disabilities would administer formal and informal measures to conduct a comprehensive educational evaluation that obtains data on listening, thinking, speaking, writing, spelling, fluency and mathematics. Based on the results of the assessment, the specialist in learning disabilities should translate the data into recommendations to inform instruction, develop behavioral change programs and implement learning supports. The assessment data should be shared and discussed with the Problem Solving team so accommodations, modifications or learning supports can be put in place in the general education program. The teacher of students with learning disabilities would provide individualized instruction, which is the hallmark of special education, in an inclusive, small group or one-to-one setting based on the student's needs and progress. Continuous monitoring of progress would continue to guide instruction and changes would be initiated as needed. With the emphasis on the use of evidence-based practice, continuous progress monitoring and instructional supports available in the general education program, the teacher of students with learning disabilities will be able to work with students who truly have specific learning disabilities, meaning significant variation documented by the assessment data and unexpected weaknesses in achievement. Education plans, interventions and learning supports would be designed based on the individual student's needs if a specific learning disability is identified. Students who are not identified as having specific learning disabilities, but who are also not achieving, would receive services implemented by other professionals such as school psychologists, behavioral specialists, speech-language therapists and guidance counselors. At the 3rd or 4th tier, the majority of students will receive special education services. The student's movement through the tiers demonstrates the need for more individualized instruction, behavioral intervention and learning supports than available in the general education curriculum/setting. Special education for students with Learning Disabilities would be geared to the needs of the individual student and on-going adjustments would be made by the teacher of students with Learning Disabilities based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the student's performance.

Meeting the Challenge

Teachers of students with learning disabilities will need to acquire specialized knowledge to individualize instruction, to build skills and recommend

modifications/accommodations needed for students with Learning Disabilities to be successful in the general curriculum.

Within the RTI framework, professional development will be needed to prepare these teachers to be able to:

understand and apply pedagogy related to cognition, learning theory, language development, behavior management and applied behavioral analysis,

possess a substantial base of knowledge about criteria for identifying scientific research-based methodology, instructional programs/methodology available for use with students with Learning Disabilities and individualization of instruction,

be proficient in providing direct skill instruction in reading, writing, spelling, math, listening and learning strategies,

be able to adjust instruction and learning supports based on student progress, observation and clinical judgment,

conduct comprehensive evaluations that include standardized assessment measures, informal assessment and behavioral observations as well as

translate the data into meaningful educational recommendations,

explain test results to help parents and teachers understand the student's needs and the recommendations generated during the assessment process,

possess strong communication skills to function as collaborative partners and members of problem solving teams,

be knowledgeable about the legal requirements of IDEA 2004, Federal and state regulations, and the history of learning disabilities.

Resources and References

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