

IEP Implementation Fidelity: A Literature Review

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SPED 696

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Abstract

The use of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a student with a disability is mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 and is used to determine the educational needs of that child. IDEA defines an IEP as a “written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with section 1414(d) of this title” (2004). This also ensures that students receiving these services through the IEP must have them available in their least restrictive environment. The least restrictive environment according to IDEA states that “To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (2004). With these federal law requirements for students to be serviced in the LRE, this often occurs at least partially in the general education classroom. The classroom teacher is included as a member of the IEP team and is asked to participate in the development of this IEP. This purpose of this inclusion is to support the creation of strategies, necessary aids, and services, as well as program modifications and support of personnel (John, 2002).

Because of this, implementation fidelity is necessary for the success of the IEP. Implementation fidelity describes the extent that the components of an IEP are followed, as mandated by IDEA. If a general education teacher is being tasked to support the IEP goals and objectives, they need to be aware of how to do so, to ensure that they are implementing them

to the degree of fidelity included in the IEP. Without this fidelity in place, students on IEPs will not be receiving the services necessary for them to be successful. For general education teachers to be able to support students in this way, they need to have been given the training and resources to know how to support their growth.

This project will focus on implementation fidelity of IEPs for students with reading disabilities. The project includes a literature review component. This component will begin with a broad understanding of what the current reality of learning disabilities is. It also discusses the current issues with identification of learning disabilities. It then goes on to be made up of research on how IEP goals are being implemented within schools, the issues related to identification and implementation of goals. In addition to the research on IEPs within the school, it will focus on the factors that contribute to the gap between the research being done on the topic and the actual implementation within schools. Finally, it describes what is currently being done within schools to bridge the gap between the research and current practices in classrooms.

In addition to the literature review component, a handbook component will also be included. The purpose of the handbook will include specific IEP goals related to the support of students with reading disabilities. These goals will be taken from real students within a current setting to ensure relevance to the study. Included with each goal, there will be research-based, relevant interventions that could be implemented in support of each of them. The purpose of this handbook is to allow for the success of general educators in supporting the goals of the IEP of students. The interventions will all be included in easy-to-understand explanations and simple to implement options. The reality that this project is based on is the current issues faced

within school districts in implementation of IEP goals and objectives by general education teachers. The system for who and how to implement said goals is unclear and has often led to a failure in the mandated supports to be provided.

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Students with specific learning disabilities are a category of those defined as receiving special education services under IDEA 2004, making up almost 50% of the the group (Otaiba et al., 2018). The category includes a large range of disorders that include one or more of the basic psychological processes used in understanding or using language, spoken, or written, that can affect the ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell or mathematics (Otaiba et al., 2018). There are still fundamental issues with learning disabilities (LD) including a lack consensus on the definition of LD, challenges related to identification and diagnosis, and a significant group of students with LD who are not benefitting from even the strongest evidence-based academic interventions (Fuchs et al., 2014).

Issues in Identification

When identifying a student with disabilities as having a learning disability, there are a few areas that make it more challenging. The category of learning disabilities is seen as one of the least understood and most debated disability affecting school-aged children, even with its high incidence (Lyon et al., 2001). There are currently many approaches that are used in identification and treatment of students with learning disabilities that are not strongly evidence-based (Fletcher et al., 2019). The reasons that these practices are still in place includes a variety of reasons such as they have roots in historical conceptions, anecdotes, unsystematic observation, as well as evidence-based approaches that have been studied and found to be inadequate (Fletcher et al., 2019). There is also much disagreement in the diagnostic criteria and assessment practices used for identification, as well as the policies and

legal requirements driving the identification of students with learning disabilities (Lyon et al., 2001).

There are three main reasons that the category of learning disabilities is difficult to define. The first issue is that a learning disability is not something that is directly observable (Fletcher et al., 2019). The disability is seen as low achievement but is often unexpected historically with the absence of another circumstance such as another disorder or disability (Fletcher et al., 2019). Another problem when it comes to defining learning disabilities is that the attributes are dimensional (Fletcher et al., 2019). To define a learning disability, it is necessary to look at the characteristics on a continuum of severity, as opposed to an explicit category with clear distinction points (Fletcher et al., 2019). The final concern when it comes to definition is comorbidity. This means that there is a high occurrence of more than one disorder in each student (Fletcher et al., 2019). In these situations, it is not often the case that one disorder causes the other, just that they may be linked, and they meet diagnostic criteria for more than one (Fletcher et al., 2019).

There are also issues specific to identification of students with learning disabilities. When looking at the attributes of a student with learning disabilities, these attributes are not categorical with simple yes or no indicators, but instead are continuous (Fletcher et al., 2019). The areas a learning disability can impact could include one or more of the following: receptive language, expressive language, basic reading skill, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculations, or mathematics reasoning (Lerner & Johns, 2015). These attributes when normally distributed can vary in degree, and not kind, making it harder to be measured (Fletcher et al., 2019). From a measurement perspective, there is no justification for the policies

common at the district, state, and US level in which setting firm thresholds is common (Fletcher et al., 2019). This approach is also flawed in that it does not account for the measurement error and correlation of tests with the continuous nature of the attributes of learning disabilities (Fletcher et al., 2019).

Another issue with identification is regarding the assessment standards that determine eligibility. When looking at the identification assessments, many of these rely on thresholds and cut points. This means that any person who would score below a given threshold is considered to have a learning disability, however the threshold is somewhat arbitrary (Fletcher et al., 2019). An example of this would be if a student were to score one point too high on an IQ-Achievement assessment, they would not qualify to receive services, although their scores could still show great need.

The measures used to indicate attributes of a learning disability are also not independent of each other. Some measures used to indicate these attributes; IQ, Achievement, and instructional response are moderately correlated (Fletcher et al., 2019). Because of this correlation, the impact of the unreliability and measurement error are magnified if there are multiple tests with incorrect correlations of measures (Fletcher et al., 2019).

Translating Issues into School

There are a variety of issues that are translated into the classroom for students with learning disabilities in schools. The current academic success of students with learning disabilities is a major example of the issues that are seen for these students in schools. Two recent studies, the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) in 2008 discovered current issues in academic

achievement of students with learning disabilities (Fuchs et al., 2014). The data found that on the Woodcock-Johnson Passage Comprehension Test, 64% of elementary school students with learning disabilities were scoring below the 20th percentile, and high school students with learning disabilities were found to be an average of 3.4 years behind in reading and 3.2 years in math (Fuchs et al., 2014).

There are multiple issues that current educators are facing in terms of implementation fidelity in the classroom. One issue that is discussed is the reluctance of educators to support students with IEPs in the classroom. Johns discusses that some educators refuse to make the accommodations or accept suggestions from the specialist to make them (2002). General educators are often not trained on how to support individual learning differences in the classroom, or how to study and apply research (Lyon et al, 2001). Because of this, it can seem like a daunting task, easier put off for methods that have been implemented in the past and those that are based off their professional judgment and decision making (McMaster et al., 2014).

Another common issue discussed is the large number of interventions that teachers are expected to implement at one time. One study found that there is a significant difference between the fidelity of interventions and the number of students with IEPs within a classroom (Tilly, 2008). The study found that the teachers with higher fidelity groups had between 1-2 students with IEPs in their classroom, as compared to lower fidelity with 3 or more students on IEPs within a classroom (Tilly, 2008). While ensuring the number of students on IEPs stays below 3 is not always possible, it is then even more important that appropriate teacher support is provided within those settings (Tilly 2008).

Another issue relates to the “contextual fit” of an intervention. This refers to the degree in which an intervention matches the “values, skills, resources, and administrative support” of the educator tasked with implementation (Marshall, 2015, p. 11). The use of contextual fit not only improves implementation fidelity, but also supports the feasibility and acceptability of a program (Marshall, 2015). This also is necessary to create interventions that are sustainable within a program (Marshall, 2015). Finally, it was found that the environment that an intervention is implemented in has a high impact on the effectiveness and fidelity of it (Marshall, 2015).

Research to Practice Gap

Although research continues to grow on how to support students with learning disabilities to be successful, there are still gaps between the research and successful implementation within schools. While almost all children can learn to read if they are taught using appropriate methods, there are clearly many who are not receiving the necessary appropriate instruction (Lyon et al, 2001). Despite the potential benefits that could be seen from evidence-based reforms, they have still had limited impact on practice to date (Cook & Cook, 2016). While this extensive research may exist, teachers are often not trained to study and apply research-based practices throughout their lessons (Lyon et al, 2001).

One major issue in the research to practice gap is the fidelity with which research-based practices are implemented. Educators understand that scientific evidence should be used to inform instructional decisions for students with disabilities as they require highly effective instruction to reach their potential, however this instruction has been negatively influenced by fads and ineffective practices (Cook & Cook, 2016). It is important to understand the necessity

of fidelity when it comes to implementation of research-based practices. Teachers have used instructional approaches they have learned but implemented only parts as they believe they know what will best address their students' needs, and adapt what can be improved, as well as ignoring parts seeming unnecessary (McMaster et al., 2014). With poor implementation fidelity, the uncertainty arises on whether the research-based practice was truly in place, or what the actual impact on student learning outcomes is (McMaster et al., 2014).

There are multiple reasons in which implementation of evidence or research-based practices are not occurring. One of the reasons for this is that those who are implementing these practices are given limited support or partnership in how to implement besides initial in-service trainings on these techniques (Cook & Cook, 2016). Because of this, the educators may run into roadblocks to implementation, or be attempting to implement with fidelity, while in reality they are implementing incorrectly. Another reason is in the challenge that educators are trying to ensure that students meet the academic needs with flexibility to support their students, requiring professional judgement and decision making (McMaster et al., 2014). An additional reason is that the conclusions drawn from research about effectiveness of instructional practices are not always seen as applicable to the unique needs of students with disabilities in that specific setting (Cook & Cook, 2016). These evidence-based practices are then seen as an approach that is derived from studies that although internally valid, do not reflect the contexts within which they teach in their complexity and uniqueness (Cook & Cook, 2016).

Bridging the Gap

With these research-based strategies being so important, there are ways in which we can bridge the gap between research and implementing the strategies in the classroom. One way to support the implementation of IEP goals and objectives is through a multi-tiered system. Response to Intervention (RtI) is one example of a multi-tiered system that can support this practice. RtI is used within an evidence-based core instructional curriculum (Benson, et al., 2020). Within this curriculum, there are also supplemental intervention supports that are put into place for those who are not meeting the academic progressions expected within the core curriculum (Benson, et al., 2020). These supports that are put into place must also be evidence-based and are then used to support the students not meeting the academic requirements from tier 1 interventions. The identification of students at-risk for academic difficulty are systematically assessed, with that data and progress monitoring then used to respond with academic intervention supports (Benson, et al., 2020). These tiers of support allow for opportunities for general educators to provide these research-based interventions within the classroom, not only to students with learning disabilities, but also to other students not making adequate academic progress.

One additional method to bridge the research to practice gap is to ensure that teachers use a balance of teacher judgment and background, educators should attempt to implement the core components of research-based practices faithfully (McMaster et al., 2014). They can then use their knowledge, experience, and student data to adjust on the noncore components of the practice to adapt for their specific students' needs (McMaster et al., 2014). To ensure that educators can do so, they must be provided with that critical academic content,

pedagogical principles, as well as the characteristics of learners necessary to implement the systematic and informed instruction (Lyon et al, 2001).

Another way to bridge the research to practice gap is through preparation and support of general educators implementing the IEP goals and objectives. Lyon et al. found that many teachers are not trained in how to support students' individual differences, or to study and apply research into these contexts (2001). Because of this, educators are unable to support the students with learning disabilities in their classroom effectively or based off this research.

When given the necessary pedagogical principals, critical academic content, and knowledge of the specific learners needs they can ensure more systematic and informed instruction (Lyon et al, 2001). One way that this is currently being achieved is through the Reading Excellence Act.

This act is being implemented in various states by developing intensive programs for students who are at risk of reading difficulties (Lyon et al, 2001). The programs require the use of scientifically based research to accelerate reading instruction for Kindergarten and early elementary school students (Lyon et al, 2001). Some current areas of concern needing to be addressed are that the implementation of these programs is not always done in consultation with the special educators, whom are those typically providing instruction to students with learning disabilities (Lyon et al, 2001). With this it is important to ensure that special educators be included in the process with roles in designing and implementing these early intervention programs (Lyon et al, 2001). Although they may not be able to be involved in the daily classroom instruction, they should still have a role in the process (Lyon et al, 2001). Some ways to ensure this include assistance with early identification and supporting the implementation of specialized interventions within the classroom as well as outside of it (Lyon et al, 2001).

Implementable Intervention Strategies Handbook

With all the previously mentioned issues in terms of the current state of identification of students with learning disabilities, translation of those needs into schools, IEP implementation fidelity, and the research to practice gap the following handbook hopes to support change. The Implementable Intervention Strategies Handbook includes ten research-based interventions to support students with reading disabilities specifically. The handbook also includes common IEP goals or objectives that these interventions could support. The purpose of this handbook is to give general educators concrete examples on how to support students with reading disabilities within the general education classroom. This allows for educators to search the resource by reading need such as decoding, fluency, or comprehension. Within each category there are clearly described intervention options to support students with reading disabilities. This allows for the educator to begin using the intervention without having to go through entire research articles to determine a beneficial strategy to implement within the classroom.

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