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Examining the Use of an Instructional History for Learning Disabled Students

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EXAMINING THE USE OF
AN INSTRUCTIONAL HISTORY FOR
LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS

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Summer, 1994

MASTERS THESIS
Submitted to the graduate faculty at
Grand Valley State University
in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Education
The main purpose of this research study was to explore the use of instructional histories as learning disabled students progress through school. The study is confined to the area of reading histories. A review of the literature provides evidence to support the use of instructional histories as a basis for the curriculum planning for learning disabled students. The literature focuses on the areas of effective curriculum development and differences in the learning styles of LD students. A survey was used to determine if teachers of LD students were using instructional histories in reading. Suggestions based on survey results and literature review are provided.
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CHAPTER 1: THESIS PROPOSAL

The careful consideration for curriculum development in reading among regular education teachers and administrators does not seem to be found among special education personnel. Regular education teachers plan together for their reading curriculum at the grade, school and district levels. Planning of this kind is conspicuously absent from the special education reading curriculum for mildly handicapped individuals.

This concern was first brought to my attention as a new special education teacher. No specific information, either past or present curriculum were followed in the teaching of reading to learning disabled students. Learning disabled students are defined as those students who possess a normal IQ, but perform much lower than would be expected. For the most part, I was left to my own devices to discover what skills the students had been taught and what each of their individual reading levels were. In speaking with other special education teachers, I found that this was a common experience for many of them. Little
or no dialogue between district or building special education teachers existed in the area of reading curriculum development. Even people outside of the schools have noticed this problem. Grant (1987) described the dilemma in his article, "Remediating Reading: A Curriculum Design". In it, he describes a parent who is worried and bewildered over the absence of a planned, sequential reading program as, year to year, her child moves from one special education teacher to the next within the school.

Proper planning is essential to the effectiveness of any program. Teaching reading is no exception. As a learning disabled student with a deficit in reading passes from one special education teacher to the next, that teacher needs to know what methods have been implemented, which were successful in helping the student reach mastery, and at what level of achievement the student currently is functioning. Goals and objectives written by Individualized Educational Planning Committees are often too brief to give adequate information about the student's past reading instruction.

Specific instructional objectives should be organized into a logical sequence in order to increase
student achievement (Bloom, 1976). Instructional goals are to be sequenced in such a way that one skill builds upon those that have already been mastered by the student (Daines, 1982). The focus of these objectives should match the present functioning of the student as well as the individual learning style of the student (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Wotruba & Algozzine, 1993).

Even current movements to encourage school improvement recognizes the need for curriculum planning (Pajak, 1987). A study done by the Department of Curriculum and Supervision at the University of Georgia recommends planning between all compensatory education personnel, including special education, Chapter I staff, etc. Goals for instruction, sharing of methods and material and a review of student progress were among the topics to be shared between regular and special education staff members. Obviously, curriculum planning is seen as a vital component in a student's success. Why then, is it not done between teachers of learning disabled students, primarily in the area of reading?

The intent of this study is to determine if a lack of instructional history is common among teachers of learning disabled students. This will be done by
surveying these teachers. Each survey respondent will be asked to identify students to whom they give reading instruction, the method that they currently use with the student and past methods used, if they are known. They will also be asked to indicate and describe the kinds of planning done between teachers of learning disabled students on grade, school and district levels, as well as planning between regular and special education faculty. Second, the data from these questionnaires will be discussed in terms of the knowledge teachers had pertaining to the past reading instruction. Finally, suggestions will be made to help teachers of learning disabled students develop a curriculum within their own school and/or district, while maintaining their own individualistic teaching style and allowing them to continue addressing the individual needs of their students. Suggestions will also be made to help these teachers find ways of indicating the individual instructional histories to the future teachers of each student.

This study is not meant to prescribe a given curriculum for teachers of learning disabled students to follow. It is, however, intended to suggest that teachers open a dialogue among themselves and learn to
give focus to the scope and sequence of their reading instruction.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

When I first discussed with my colleagues my concern over the lack of instructional histories that teachers of learning disabled students are provided with, a few of them disagreed that there was a lack of necessary information needed to provide for the successful education of students with learning disabilities. They felt that knowing the specific strengths and weaknesses of students, as well as their past instruction, would not change the way in which they taught the student.

Is the past instruction and individual profile of these students important? Believing the answer was yes, I set out to locate information and research to support my theory. Unfortunately, no research has been done specifically in the area of instructional histories of learning disabled students and its effect on their success. Research does contribute evidence to support the use of instructional histories for use in planning of reading curriculum for learning disabled students based on the following principles:
Principle #1: Providing an instructional history is important in that it allows for a logical sequence to continue throughout the child's reading curriculum.

In the past, learning disabled students were viewed differently than they are today. An early model of learners held that there were poor learners and good learners. Poor learners were believed to simply not be able to acquire some of the knowledge and skills good learners could acquire. These conditions were considered to be stable and did not change throughout the life of the individual. Later, research showed that all students could learn, but that the rates of learning differed from one student to the next. Currently, evidence has been gathered to show that rates of learning depend on the conditions and methods used in teaching (Bloom, 1976).

How we have come to view learning disabled students is important in how we design our curriculum. Curriculum is meant to provide experiences that will relate present and future experiences with those of the past (Dewey, 1938) in a logical sequence, with clear and specific goals and expectations for the learner (Thurlow, Ysseldyke, Wotruba & Algozzine, 1993). By
providing an instructional history, the quality and connectedness of these experiences will be maintained. If we continue to believe in early research on the learning disabled child, instructional histories are of no use. However, if we accept the conclusions of current research, we see that there is a need for knowledge of a student’s instructional history.

As teachers, we must take into consideration the past successful experiences of each learner and find the future path that is best for them, although this may not be the easiest path for us (Bloom, 1954). The most creative of lessons, packed with important information, can be carried out for nothing if the end result does not reflect our original intention - that of the achievement of the student. Curriculum should be developed as a circle of three components - teaching, intentions of instruction, and curriculum development - each one playing a part in molding the other two facets (Eisner, 1979).

Employing these three components has become the focus of many school improvement programs in recent years. Teams of teachers meet to share goals and instructional concerns as well as contributing their own personal insight and solutions to other members of
the group (Pajak, 1987). These discussions are meant to benefit regular education students who learn at similar proximal rates to their peers. The learning disabled child is often one who learns at a slower rate or differently than his/her peers. Because of this, the teacher of the learning disabled student is often faced with students at several different levels of development. Team planning/discussions and instructional histories of the students would allow the special education teacher the opportunity to apply the three main components of curriculum development more efficiently to his/her entire curriculum.

Principle #2: Use of an instructional history is important in providing a match of instructional delivery to each student's needs.

The typical learning disabled student is a 13-year old male in 6th grade, possessing an IQ of 96. He receives 78 minutes per day of special education services in language arts and mathematics. He has received these services since being placed in Special Education at the end of third grade (Kavale & Reese, 1992).
Stereotypical descriptions such as this would lead us to believe that all learning disabled students are similar and fit neatly into special education classroom curriculums with little adaptation of lessons other than their lower level of functioning. This is a misconception. Research (Speece, 1987) has shown that information is processed in a variety of ways. This research has two main areas of focus. The neurological findings and the practical applications. The neurological view emphasizes the differences in brain development and functioning. The practical applications of this research focus on how these differences are manifested in the acquisition of information through different learning styles.

Neurological Discoveries

In order to understand why an instructional history is important, it is essential for the teacher to understand the neurological differences of their students.
The brain is divided into two hemispheres. The left side of the brain specializes in verbal and logical activities. This includes sequencing, such as keeping track of time and order, analyzing whole concepts into parts, and utilizing rational thought. The right brain specializes in visuo-spatial tasks, such as recognizing patterns and relations. It is intuitive and sees things as a whole (Richards, 1984).

Some studies have shown a correlation between left-handedness and learning disabilities (Geschwind & Behan, 1982). Postmortem studies on dyslexic patients have found there to be an excessive number of neurons present on the left side of the brain. Other studies have found the left side of the cortex to be abnormally developed. Scientists believe that these abnormalities in neuron placement and cortical development have suppressed the transmission of information to this side of the brain. In these subjects, however, the right hemisphere appeared normal (Galaburda, 1983). In fact, some researchers believe that since the left hemisphere receives less impulses or synapses than the right, the right hemisphere competes for these synapses and wins out over the left, thereby producing a more developed right hemisphere (Rastatter, Watson & Shulman, 1990).
This would explain the tendency for these people to be lower in verbal and logical (e.g. mathematical) skills.

Tasks commonly found in school rely largely on left brain functions. Reading, mathematical calculation, even learning to use a computer are all tasks that require the verbal, sequential and logical functions found on the left side of the brain (Rubenzer, 1982). This could lead one to believe that all children process either as a left-brain learner or a right-brain learner. But these tendencies to function from one side of the brain are further compounded by the student’s environmental, physical, emotional, and psychological factors (Theis, 1979).

One study by Deborah Speece (1987) attempted to categorize learning disabled readers into subcategories for the types of strengths and weaknesses they possessed, thereby indentifying learning styles of learning disabled readers. Six categories were identified. These six categories focused on three areas: verbal/phonetic encoding, attention span, and use of memory strategies. The first group included students with no outstanding strengths in verbal or phonological encoding and possessing an average attention span. They were deficient, however, in their
use of memory strategies. The second group identified showed a deficit in verbal encoding. This group was the slowest to respond to questions although they were shown to have average attention. Memory was a strength for this group. The third group included students whose memory was average, attention span was low, and had a strength in phonetic encoding. The fourth group was deficient in both modes of encoding although their memory and attention span were determined to be average. The fifth group differed from the fourth only in their low attention span. The final group consisted of students with high verbal encoding ability, average attention and deficient use of memory strategies. Speece described each category as being diverse within itself, however, and called for further research on the subject (Speece, 1987).

These differences in information processing have led researchers to encourage teachers to focus in on the type of functioning the child accesses best. These researchers also suggest an environment that provides rich sensory experiences, where risk-taking is encouraged with emotional support. Physical exercise is also to be provided to optimize neurological and physical functioning (MacRae-Campbell, 1989).
Instruction should be altered when conventional methods fail and should be adapted to the learners preferred processing mode, helping to make learning more enjoyable, meaningful and successful. Learning style, however, should not be considered as any one particular model or another, but as a variety of behaviors. This is especially true in younger children (Sinatra, 1983).

Neurology into Practice

Throughout educational history, teaching and learning have been seen as having a direct correlation with each other. The harder the teacher works, the more the student will learn. If the student fails to learn, blame is placed on the student or the teacher, school, administrator, etc. This view is overly simplistic, but one thing is true - the quality of the instruction does dictate the quality of the learning (Keefe, 1979). Knowing the instructional history of a student will allow the improved quality of the instruction from the teacher, enhancing the learning of the student.

What should be included in an instructional history? When learning styles were first being studied
for use in education, checklists and questionnaires were used to help determine the individual learning style. Some would even compile profiles of students for the teacher and prescribe a course of action and materials to be used (Carbo, 1990). Other methods have attempted to match IQ subtest outcomes to instructional methods. These methods try to make it easier for the teacher to categorize students, but the individualism of the student may be lost. These methods have not been shown to produce effective results when applied to research situations (Good, Vollmer, Katz, Creek & Chowdhri, 1993). Instructional histories need to be more cognitive and specific. They must be individualized for each student so that remediation techniques can accurately match the individual student (Mayer, 1993).

Instructional histories should avoid pinpointing shortcomings, but instead should show relationships between learning intentions, opportunities, accomplishments and risks. Accomplishments and opportunities should be the basis for the analysis and interpretation of the individual learning style (Milazzo, Buchanan, Escoe & Schutz, 1981).
Abilities and talents should also be addressed with regard to accomplishments and the learning context in which they occur (Blythe & Gardner, 1990). These abilities should not be described as left/right hemisphere activities only, but should encompass all forms of achievement - linguistic, logical, musical, spatial, kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and talents. Howard Gardner describes these as forms of intelligence. He maintains that each of these seven kinds of intelligence are found in varying degrees in all people, and the combination of them is what makes up the individual learning style (Gardner, 1987).

In describing the instructional history of the student in reading, it is important to include four areas. These areas include the verbal strengths characterized, strengths in memory, phonological strengths and the organization of the strategic behaviors the individual employs (Das, Snart & Mulcahy, 1982). An example of how this can be done will be provided in the next chapter.
Summary

Why we should bother with providing an instructional history of our learning disabled students? From the evidence given, developing an effective curriculum for these students can only occur when the teacher is fully informed about the student. They need to be aware of how the neurological differences in each student influences their ability to learn and what the best mode of instruction would be. A day or a week, even a month is not enough time to find this out accurately. An instructional history would save precious time trying to find this out - time the student could be using to succeed.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY, RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a lack of communication of the instructional histories of learning disabled students from one special education teacher to the next, especially with regard to reading instruction. In an attempt to find out what information these teachers did receive, questionnaires were given to a random sample of forty-five teachers of learning disabled students. Twenty-one of the teachers responded. They varied in the grade levels in which they taught from kindergarten through 12th grade. Urban, suburban and rural districts were represented. They also varied in the amount of experience they had in teaching learning disabled students.

The questionnaire focused on two main areas. First, questions were asked about how these teachers received and conveyed information about specific methods and activities that were successful with their learning disabled students. Secondly, questions were asked about meetings with other special education teachers at various levels within their district to determine if teachers communicated with each other about individual histories in these settings. This was
also useful in providing evidence as to how the teachers of learning disabled reading students saw their role in reading curriculum development - either in isolation or as a part of a team.

Question #1: When you receive a new student for reading, how do you know what methods/activities have been successfully used with that student in the past?

Most teachers rely upon the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and contact with the past teacher as a means of receiving information needed to
make informed decisions about the needs of their students. Contacting the previous teacher may be an excellent way of obtaining this information, but only if the teacher is available. The previous teacher may have moved, retired, changed jobs, etc. making this contact impossible.

Question #2: When another special education teacher receives your student for reading in the future, how will you indicate to that teacher the methods/activities that will be effective with that individual student?

Methods for Providing Histories

- Portfolio/Teacher contact (19.8%)
- IEP only (19.8%)
- Portfolio only (19.6%)
- IEP/Teacher contact (43.8%)
Teacher contact is once again listed as part of the method for providing instructional histories to future teachers. Portfolios were also mentioned as a preferred method of providing information. This seems to be more in keeping with research discussed in the last chapter, however, most teachers described their portfolios as samples of student's work. Strengths and/or learning styles of the students were usually not indicated as being included in the portfolio. IEP goals are also considered to be a main method of conveying information on the instructional history of a student. However, consider the answers given to this survey question:

Question #3: Do you believe that IEP goals provide detailed and accurate enough information to adequately allow you to pinpoint specific methods/activities that will prove to be successful for each student?

Although many teachers rely on IEP goals to provide information, only 24% of them believe that these goals provide adequate information about the
methods and activities used successfully with the student. One teacher even remarked, "Usually, IEP goals reflect the teacher’s agenda for that subject, not the individuality of the learner."

Contact with other teachers of learning disabled students was also emphasized. When surveyed about meetings and information shared at them, the results were as follows:

Question #4: Are future special education teachers of your learning disabled students invited to
annual IEPC meetings, if you will not have that student again next year?

Are Future Teachers Invited?

No (43.0%)

Yes (57.0%)

Just over half of the teachers surveyed invited the future special education teacher to participate in the IEPC meeting for the student. This meeting would provide an opportunity for the current special education teacher to share the instructional history of the student with the future teacher.

Question #5: If yes, are the specific methods/activities used successfully to teach reading to the student discussed at that time?
Of the portion of teachers that invited the future special education teacher to the IEPC meeting, only 58% indicated discussion of the history of the student. The IEPC meeting is usually not a time when teachers are sharing this information. Perhaps other meeting times are used to discuss the success of instruction of individual students. This was addressed in the following questions:
Question #6: How often do you plan your reading curriculum...

...with other teachers of learning disabled students at your grade level?

Grade Level Planning of LD Reading

Every 4-5 mo. (5.8%)
Weekly (5.8%)
Monthly (16.8%)
Every 2-3 mo. (48.8%)
None (25.8%)

... with other teachers of learning disabled students in your building?
At their own grade and building level, most teachers do meet with other special education teachers to plan their reading curriculum. These teachers seem to believe that they are not isolated in terms of curriculum development, but are a part of a team.

Nearly two-thirds of the teachers of learning disabled reading students met regularly with teachers of other LD reading students at a similar grade level. At these two levels, opportunity certainly exists for dialogue to take place concerning the reading successes and learnings styles of individual students. Students
move on to other buildings, however, and this same concern for teamwork throughout the district seems to be sadly lacking as shown in the final part of this question, as shown in the following question.

How often do you plan your reading curriculum with other teachers of learning disabled students within your district?

Only 26% of the teachers surveyed met with other teachers of learning disabled reading students on a district level. The opportunity to discuss individual
histories of students on this level does not appear to
be prevalent. As students pass from elementary to
middle school and middle school to high school, reading
curriculum of learning disabled students may lack
consistency. In the area for written comments at the
end of the questionnaire, one teacher even wrote, "The
(high school) staff doesn't seem to be concerned with
what the middle school staff was using."

Question #7: Please indicate at which levels the
planning included the sharing of instructional
histories of learning disabled students in reading with
other teachers, particularly these student’s future
teachers.

The learning disabled student’s history was most
often discussed at his/her grade level or while they
attended one particular building. However, once the
child left that building, there was much less attempt
made at contacting other special education teachers who
would have the child. Often meetings simply were not
held. Only 26% of teachers of learning disabled
students held meetings with other teachers within their
district. These were planning meetings for reading
curriculum for learning disabled students. The instructional histories of students would be of invaluable worth during these meetings. But is this information being shared during curriculum meetings?

Observing the data above and reading statements such as these may lead one to believe that many teachers may be more concerned with doing things their own way, rather than in the way that is the most effective for the student.

Most teachers of learning disabled students do seem to understand the importance of instructional histories and are concerned with the finding out this
information. They contact past and future teachers, they read IEP goals, compile portfolios and attend meetings. The data provided by this survey, however, suggests a lack of consistency in obtaining and passing on this vital information, both in the methods and timeliness of it's transmission. Consistent, objective ways of recording this information need to be devised and used in every district.
Suggestions to Providing an Instructional History

1. Indicate the verbal and phonological strengths of the child. Verbal strengths focus on how the students uses syntax and meaning in decoding words; phonological strengths focus on how the child employs phonetic (grapheme-phoneme) translation. Record how they seem to process language information most efficiently.

2. Indicate goals or intentions of instruction, the method of instruction and the rate at which the child succeeded with this method. This would seem to be a repeat of the current method of writing IEP goals, however, it should be more specific, including examples of student work, and provide information on the progress of instruction after it has been given.

3. Indicate adaptational strategies that the child has learned to use efficiently and those strategies which he/she is beginning to learn to use.
4. Give evidence of how well the child is able to remember. This should include a description of the information the child was expected to remember and how the information was presented at the time (eg. verbal directions, written list of items, etc.)

5. Teachers whose students will be attending a new building in the coming year should meet with the future special education teacher to share information needed to plan reading curriculum.

More attention needs to be paid to this area. Ideally, Individualized Educational Program forms would be revised as to allow for the information suggested here. However, it is possible that this could not be done without "categorizing" students and again losing the focus on their individuality. Hopefully, future research will provide other models of how this information can be gathered and what it's effect is upon the consistency with which the child learns.

With my own learning disabled students, I intend to use the suggestions above and include information in each child's work portfolio that covers those areas. I regularly meet with other special education teachers on
all levels and hope to share this information with them. In this way, we can build a greater consistency of instruction that meets the distinct learning style of each student.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

EDS 695 QUESTIONNAIRE

1. When you receive a new student for reading, how do you know what methods/activities have been successfully used with that student in the past?

2. When another special education teacher receives your student for reading in the future, how will you indicate to that teacher the methods/activities that will be effective with that individual student?

3. Do you believe that IEP goals provide detailed and accurate enough information to adequately allow you to pinpoint specific methods/activities that will prove to be successful for each student? (Circle one.)

   Yes  No

4. How do often do you plan your reading curriculum...

   a) with other teachers of learning disabled reading students at your grade level? (Circle one.)

      Weekly  Monthly  2-3 Month Intervals
      4-5 Month Intervals  Not At All

   b) with other teachers of learning disabled reading students within your building?

      Weekly  Monthly  2-3 Month Intervals
4-5 Month Intervals  Not At All

c) with other teachers of learning disabled students throughout your district?

Weekly  Monthly  2-3 Month Intervals

4-5 Month Intervals  Not At All

5. Please indicate at which levels planning includes the sharing of instructional histories of learning disabled students in reading with other teachers, particularly the students future special education teachers.

LD Grade Level Meetings
LD Building Level Meetings
LD District Level Meetings

6. Are future teachers of your learning disabled students invited to annual IEPC meetings, if you will not have that student again next year?

Yes  No

If yes, are the specific methods/activities used to teach reading to the student discussed at that time?

Yes  No

Comments: ________________________________________________

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