Theories Integration Paper: Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of learning disabilities as it relates to counseling. This paper will discuss the prevalence of learning disabilities in the population, as well as characteristics often present in students with learning disabilities. Counseling based in Adlerian and Choice theory can be effective in use with this population because of the focus on personal choice, responsibility and empowering the client to act in new ways to change their situation. Specific creative techniques that can be used with this population will also be discussed.
Integration Counseling Paper: Students with Learning Disabilities

Introduction

Students with learning disabilities make up a considerable percentage of the students being educated in America today. These students are vital members of our school communities, but face unique needs that are often left un- or under-addressed by educators and counselors. There is an ethical and legal obligation to assure that the needs of this population are met. Legislation considering the rights of those with disabilities can be found at all levels of government, including the United Nations. The United Nation’s “Conventions on the Rights of the Child” states that children with learning disabilities should receive “the fullest possible social inclusion and individual development” (Pattison, 2005, p. 122). This social inclusion and individual development can be facilitated by counselors in schools and in the community.

Overview of the Problem

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provides a set of guidelines for recognizing and caring for students with disabilities as they are educated. IDEA requires that all students be screened for disabilities, with those students who show indications of difficulty given more comprehensive screening, and if necessary, plans for appropriate educational interventions. Just under half of all students served under IDEA are categorized as having specific learning disabilities (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007). In Washington State, there are nearly 45,000 students being served for specific learning disabilities under IDEA, just under 40% of all students receiving (OSPI, 2010). This category is expanding. Since 1975, when IDEA was first enacted, the number of students receiving services for specific learning disabilities has tripled (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).
Demographically, there is little ethnic disparity among students with learning disabilities, with the exception of under-representation of Asian/Pacific Islander students. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are over-represented in the population of students with learning disabilities. Boys are four to five times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with a learning disability. There is also a high rate of comorbidity between learning disabilities and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), with roughly 30% of students with diagnosed learning disabilities also having an ADHD diagnosis (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007).

In addition to academic difficulties, students with learning disabilities often face emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and reduced social competence (Pattison, 2005; Meeks, Adler, Kunert & Floyd, 2004; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007). Learning disabilities are often a source of embarrassment and pessimism that contribute to students viewing school as a source of failure (Meeks et al., 2004). The stigma associated with having a learning disability can contribute to the construction of a negative self-concept. Students with learning disabilities may be made fun of by their peers, as well as feel isolated by their differences. A learning disability can be used by a student as an excuse for academic underachievement and lessened academic effort (Rodis, 2001, p. 215).

Recognizing a Learning Disability

Under IDEA, in order to qualify as having a specific learning disability the student must have “a disorder in one or more of the psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written” which may manifest itself as “an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations” (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007, p. 106). However, if a learning problem is “primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environment,
Because there is a wide range of different learning disabilities, the signs of a learning disability are many and varied. It is common for individuals with a learning disability to have average or above average intelligence, yet low achievement in one or more academic areas. Educators may notice a student struggling in one subject area, such as spelling, or with a specific type of assignment, such as assignments that require retention of mathematical concepts. If a discrepancy exists between the intellectual ability of a student and their academic achievement, it is possible a learning disability may be present and further screening should be conducted. The difficulties students with learning disabilities have in processing can also sometime affect students’ understanding of how to relate to their peers (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Weheymer, 2007).

Theory and Counseling Strategies

Theoretical Orientation

Adlerian and choice theory are complimentary and appropriate for use in schools, where counseling contact is often brief. Both Adlerian and choice theory focus on the concepts of choice and personal responsibility. Adlerian theory teaches that individuals make choices based on how they interpret and feel about the situations in their lives, as influenced by their unique worldview. Individual choice and responsibility are regarded as vital to personal development (Graham & Pehrsson, 2011). Choice theory indicates that in order to function successfully, people need to fulfill five basic psychological needs: survival, love and belonging, power or achievement, freedom, and fun (Portrie-Bethke, 2011). In addition to fulfilling these basic needs, individuals desire to find a purpose in their living, as outlined by Adlerian theory (Corey, 2009).
The combination of Adlerian and choice theory places basic psychological needs in the context of a larger search for purpose. This combination allows for evaluation of the role and influence of our context and personal systems on our worldview, but also allows clients to focus on what is within their realm of control. Adlerian theory insists that people have the ability to interpret, influence, and create events in their lives, changing the perceptions they develop early on by consciously modifying their faulty assumptions (Corey, 2009). Choice theory similarly focuses on teaching clients how to make more effective choices and learn skills that help them to cope with stresses and problems they encounter in daily life (Stone & Dahir, 2006). This focus on personal control empowers clients to change their perspective and act in ways that lead to greater overall functioning and understanding. Adlerian theory gives counseling a framework for evaluating an individual’s context and relationship to a larger system; choice theory allows the individual to work within that context to choose differently and take control of their actions.

Relevance to the Population

Rodis (2001) noted the tendency of students to regard a learning disability as their single defining characteristic. The holistic nature of Adlerian therapy allows counselors and clients to view a learning disability as only a part of the client’s total person by regarding the learning disability as part of the machinery of the brain. This reassignment diminishes the threatening nature of the disability (Rodis, 2001). Particularly with adolescents, who are addressing a crisis of identity formation, this holistic approach can help them to define themselves in a way that doesn’t place undo emphasis on their disabilities.

For students with learning disabilities, school is often a source of stress and frustration. Stone & Dahir (2006) note that in Adlerian theory, behavioral difficulties stem from this sense of discouragement. Students with learning disabilities may suffer from low self-esteem and a
feeling of being different from their peers. They may feel as though they cannot be successful. This fits with the Adlerian concept that an individual’s difficulties are largely the result of a lack of social connectedness and the presence of faulty goals that keep them from achieving success (Graham & Pehrsson, 2011). The Adlerian concept of re-orientation and re-education allows the counselor and client to work together to evaluate the client’s worldview, including their goals and perceptions of success and purpose. Clients can then put this new awareness into action, choosing behaviors that lead to higher functioning. (Graham & Pehrsson, 2011).

Choice theorists would view the presenting difficulties of a student with a learning disability as evidence of basic needs going unmet (Portrie-Bethke, 2011). Choice theory proposes that individuals can gain indirect control over their emotions and physiology through directly choosing their actions and thoughts. Though this view can sometimes seem insensitive to those with disabilities, it highlights how a client’s choices impact their experiences. Clients can choose how much energy they expend on negative feelings and thoughts, and can become more aware of how their choices impact outcomes (Portrie-Bethke, 2011). For this reason, students may find choice therapy empowering; this framework gives clients the tools to evaluate alternatives to how they may have approached a problematic situation in the past. This focus on the present helps students gain self-confidence and assurance (Stone & Dahir, 2006). For students with a learning disability, this allows them to take the control from their lives away from their disability.

Both Adlerian and choice theory give responsibility for change to the student. While the counselor can help students to understand their worldview and choices and encourage students to develop a more comprehensive frame of self-understanding, students must set their own goals and put their choices into action. This responsibility can help students with learning disabilities
to view themselves as capable of addressing their own difficulties in the future. Students are able to evaluate their goals and chose the most effective behavior within their context.

_Counseling Techniques_

Many techniques can be used successfully with students with learning disabilities. From the Adlerian perspective, the counseling relationship is more important than the use of specific techniques; Adlerian theory works to fit techniques to the needs of the individual clients (Corey, 2009). Talk therapy can be effective with students with disabilities just as it can be effective in counseling with students that do not have a presenting learning disability. Pattison (2005) found that counseling that was inclusive of those with learning disabilities had more success when engaging in creative and flexible approaches, including the use of art and creative materials. Creative approaches to counseling are most often used in the assessment phase of Adlerian counseling, but can be used throughout the counseling relationship to explore the client’s perceptions and engage in self-reflection (Graham & Pehrsson, 2011).

One creative technique that can be successful with students with learning disabilities is structured bibliotherapy. Bibliotherapy uses literature to help clients deal with difficulties by helping them to identify with characters in a pre-selected story, work through their issues, and move towards experiencing catharsis. From the Adlerian perspective, bibliotherapy can be used to explore worldviews, gain insight, and work towards reorientation (Graham & Pehrsson, 2011). Discussion of a story can help a client to evaluate his or her own choices and motivations. The literature selected for bibliotherapy must be appropriate to the topic of counseling as well as the developmental stage and cultural context of the client; it is sometimes appropriate to include the client in the choice of literature. The counselor and client read the story and then engage in a
discussion of the material. This discussion should focus on the client’s experience of the material, including what characters, themes, or moments with which they identified.

It is important to note that bibliotherapy may not be appropriate for use with all students with learning disabilities, or may need to be modified depending on the specific disability a student struggles with; for instance, bibliotherapy may be difficult with a student who has difficulty with words, such as a student with dyslexia or dyspraxia. In some cases, it will be more effective to read a story with or to a student rather than having a student read on their own.

Another creative technique that can have success with students with learning disabilities is the creating of life map book. This approach is ideal for students whose presenting difficulties include stress, discouragement, low self-esteem, or a lack of coping skills, all difficulties that may present in students with learning disabilities. Using art materials such as colored paper, maps, photos, magazine and comic book clippings, pens, markers, colored pencils, and other artist supplies, the student creates collages or pictures relating to life events and future goals. The client can also contribute personal artifacts such as family photos and ticket stubs. Once the book has been constructed, the counselor invites the client to process the pictures they have created in their book.

The life map book can allow a student to present the story of their life to their counselor, helping to explore his or her perception of his or her life, including past experiences, family constellations, lifestyle, life goals, and plans for the future (Cook, 2011). This examination of the past fits with the Adlerian focus on early experiences and family of origin, while the inclusion of the future can look to the desired outcome of choices based on new goals. The book can also be used as a jumping off point for discussion about needs and choices from the frame of choice theory. This sort of artistic intervention could be particularly useful with students with learning
disabilities because it does not require reading, writing, or mathematics, the areas in which students with learning disabilities have the most difficulty. The resulting discussion of the life map can also facilitate the recognition of personal skills and strengths of the client.

Conclusion/Final Thoughts

Students with learning disabilities are a sizable part of the student population in America. These students often face difficulties in addition to academic, including low self-esteem, negative self-concept, feelings of isolation, and frustration with academic pursuits. School counselors have an ethical obligation to empower these students to succeed educationally and socially. By incorporating the concepts of Adlerian and choice theory into practice, counselors can help students to explore and reevaluate their worldview and goals, empowering students to see how they can alter their choices to assure their needs are met. Students can learn to modify their behavioral choices in ways that lead to more successful situational outcomes. Creative interventions such as bibliotherapy or the construction of a life map book can be particularly effective with this population, giving clients a different way to express their needs within a safe counseling environment. With support from a counseling relationship and a focus on elements within the client’s control, students with learning disabilities can develop strategies that will help them to live successful, fulfilling lives.
Resources


Appendix A

**Life Map Accordion Book**
(Adapted from Katrina Cook)

**Indications:** Appropriate for presenting difficulties including discouragement, low self-esteem, negative self-concept, depression, major life transitions, lack of decision-making skills, lack of coping skills, or stress.

**Goal:** Exploration of life experiences to improve self-esteem, mood, decision-making, coping, or transitional reinforcement.

**Modality:** Art

**The Fit:** Life maps fit well within Adlerian therapy because they help the client examine early recollections, impact of experience within their family constellation (such as birth order), lifestyle, life goals, fostering social interest, developing an action plan, and future goals. All of these areas are a focus of Adlerian therapy. The book can also fit in with the goals of Choice theory in discussion of future plans and present difficulties. The activity allows clients to turn their life map into a book.

**Population:** Adolescents/Adults; Groups/Individuals;

**Materials:** Colored paper, cardboard, cardstock, glue, glitter pens, paint, pencils, markers, crayons, magazine and comic book clippings, maps, photos, etc. The client can also contribute personal items such as family photos, drawings, ticket stubs, etc.

**Instructions:**
1. Help the client construct the accordion-style book. Fold a large section of paper (possibly several pages connected) into an accordion book by folding the paper back onto itself in alternating directions. The final book should have pages of equal size and should open like an accordion so it could be laid flat and all pages would be exposed at once.
2. Cut two pieces of cardboard or cardstock slightly larger than the dimension of the pages. Glue these pieces to the front and back pages of the book to create covers.
3. Lay the accordion book out flat, and invite the student to create a story of their life across the pages. Provide enough guidance to encourage the student to reflect on their past, present, and future. Using parts of an old map as a background can help the student to connect the metaphor of a map to their story.
4. When the client is done with their book, invite them to tell you about the memories and items they used in the book’s construction.
5. Some questions that may be used to facilitate discussion:
   - *Tell me about the story you are telling here.*
   - *Tell me about the future you created in this book.*
   - *What do you see that is different about your past and your present? What about your present and your future?*
   - *What about your present is within your control? What about your future?*
• What choices are you making in this part of your story?
• If the student is presenting with a particular difficulty, you can ask the student where in their story they see the difficulty.

6. After processing the book, consider keeping the project to discuss further in the counseling progress, or at the end of the counseling process as a way to assess progress.