

Bringing Children from the Margins to the Page: School Counselors

Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

School counselors must be knowledgeable about the distinctive needs of students with specific learning disabilities in order to meet the mandate to provide equitable services to all students as part of their comprehensive school counseling program. The training of school counselors renders a valuable part of the educational team working to promote optimal outcomes for this population. This article provides an overview of specific learning disabilities, and an outline of the unique needs of students eligible for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) services. Critical issues in the domains of academic, career, and social-emotional development are addressed, as well as strategies to assist students.

Keywords: specific learning disabilities, special education, school counseling, IDEA

Bringing Children from the Margins to the Page: School Counselors Supporting Students with Learning Disabilities

With approximately 13% of public school students eligible for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), there is no doubt that school counselors will have the opportunity to work with this population (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). School counselors are called upon to provide equitable services to all students and, thus, to provide appropriate service to students with special needs (Geddes Hall, 2015; Milsom, 2002; Nava & Gragg, 2015). The American School Counselor Association (2016) position statement on students with disabilities urges school counselors to stay abreast of best practices for serving the academic, career, and personal social development of students qualifying for IDEA services, ensuring that they are part of any comprehensive school counseling program.

School counselor training programs typically provide limited explicit instruction related to special education and learning disabilities (Geddes Hall, 2015; Milsom, 2006; Milsom & Akos, 2003; Nava & Gragg, 2015; Nichter & Edmonson, 2005). However, school counselors bring unique knowledge and training to the school team that is highly relevant to improving outcomes for students with learning disabilities. Indeed, they are a crucial point of contact for students with learning disabilities, as well as their parents and other stakeholders (Kushner, Maldonado, Pack, Hooper, 2011; Owens, Thomas, & Strong, 2011). This article describes ways that school counselors can effectively work with students with learning issues, particularly with specific learning disabilities (SLD). We begin with an overview of learning disabilities, and then review the literature on the distinctive needs of qualifying students in the academic, career, and social-emotional

realms. The remainder of the article focuses on strategies of support, with an emphasis on counseling approaches to assist students with SLD.

A Brief History of Special Education Services

As a federal mandate, special education services in public schools date back to the 1975 passage of the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*. In the 40 years since the law first took effect, it has been reauthorized several times, most recently becoming the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* in 2004. To determine eligibility for services, IDEA defines 13 categories of eligibility for special education, which are listed in Table 1, along with the percentage of students served in each category during the 2014-15 academic year. These categories do not align with those in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual-V*.

Table 1

IDEA Eligibility Categories and Percent of Public School Students Served, 2014-15

Category	Percent of Students Ages 3-21
All disabilities	13.0
Specific learning disabilities	4.5
Speech or language impairments	2.6
Intellectual disability	0.8
Developmental delay	0.8
Emotional disturbance	0.7
Hearing impairments	0.2
Orthopedic impairments	0.1
Other health impairments	1.7
Visual impairments	0.1
Multiple disabilities	0.3
Deaf-blindness	(rounds to 0)
Autism	1.1
Traumatic brain injury	0.1

Of the 13 categories, the milder disabilities are the ones that are more prevalent in the student population. School counselors and teachers are most likely to work with students who have SLDs (4.5%), speech or language impairments (2.6%), other health impairments (OHI, 1.7%). Although less prevalent, emotional disturbance (ED) and autism are also of great concern in schools. Familiarity with the most common eligibility categories better prepare school counselors to serve students with SLD and their families. In this article, we will focus on just the most common category of SLD.

Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

The most common IDEA eligibility category, specific learning disability (SLD), means that a student has average cognitive ability, but a processing disorder interferes with his or her ability to be successful on academic tasks, such as reading, writing, or mathematics (Scanlon, 2013). Dyslexia is a reading disability that falls under the category of SLD. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, while not an eligibility category of its own, may manifest itself as the processing disorder that interferes with a child's learning, thus it may fall under the SLD category, too. SLD excludes from this category children who have not had the opportunity to learn due to environmental factors, absenteeism, or even ineffective teachers. It also excludes children who have a different disability that interferes with academic growth, such as intellectual disability (formerly mental retardation/developmental disability), or emotional disturbance (Pullen, Lane, Ashworth, & Lovelace, 2011).

Students with learning disabilities typically receive specially designed instruction in special education to help them develop their academic skills, such as reading,

mathematics, and writing. Service delivery models for specially designed instruction include “pull-out” programs in which students are pulled out of their general education classrooms to receive instruction in another room, “push-in” services in which special educators provide services in general education classrooms, and/or on a consultative basis in which special educators support general educators in implementing instruction rather than directly serving students (Pullen et al., 2011). According to federal law, once a student is deemed eligible for special education services, they are also eligible to receive an array of supports, if needed, to help the student benefit from special education assistances. In addition to academic supports, these special education services may include speech and language therapy, adapted physical education, occupational therapy, or mental health services (Pullen et al., 2011). Unfortunately, despite the availability of mental health services in many schools, students with disabilities rarely receive these services (Wagner et al., 2006).

Characteristics of Specific Learning Disabilities

Students with SLD experience a range of emotional and behavioral concerns that impact their learning (Pullen et al., 2011). Learning disabilities are associated with various issues that may challenge a student’s social and emotional competence, including poor language and communication skills (including pragmatic language deficits), central nervous system dysfunction, trouble identifying and understanding others’ feelings, as well as difficulties with social information processing (e.g., social perception, nonverbal perception, social cognition), and social behavior (Bryan, Burstein, & Ergul, 2004; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004; Kavale & Mostert, 2004). Students with SLD are more likely than their peers to have deficits in self-esteem, and emotional

well-being, as well as poor relationships with family and friends (Ginieri-Coccosis et al., 2013; Lambie & Milsom, 2010). In addition, students with SLD often struggle with shame, feeling different, loneliness and problems gaining acceptance (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006; Lambie & Milsom, 2010; Quigney & Studer, 1998). Furthermore, research indicates that students with SLD have lower academic self-concept (Bryan et al., 2004), academic expectations and persistence (Baird, Scott, Dearing, & Hamill, 2009), and academic self-efficacy (Hen & Goroshit, 2014; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). They may also struggle with excessive absences from school (Redmond & Hosp, 2008), diminished hope (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006), anxiety (Nelson & Harwood, 2011a), depression (Maag & Reid, 2006; Nelson & Harwood, 2011b), and negative emotions (Bryan et al., 2004; Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). Moreover, these challenges may lead to decreased effort and investment in academic tasks (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006).

Although it is widely understood that learning disabilities depress academic progress, less attention has been paid to the role of affect on learning (Bryan et al., 2004), or to the relationship between learning disabilities and social-emotional difficulties. For example, struggling learners demonstrate their anxiety and shame about reading by withdrawing from the small group lesson or burying their faces in their hands, and hopelessness by making statements such as, "I can't do it." These behaviors intensify when reading tasks are more difficult and may not be seen to the same degree in children who make adequate progress in their reading (Greulich et al., 2014). Research suggests that children with SLD not only experience a greater sense of anxiety when engaging in mathematics tasks than their peers, but also that this anxiety

may hinder their ability to process information and procedures fluently and with automaticity (Allsopp, Kyger, & Lovin, 2007; Passolunghi, 2011).

A possible explanation for the interplay of emotions and cognition is found in Cognitive Load Theory. The cognitive load theory posits that cognitive resources available for learning new materials are finite (Sweller, Chandler, Tierney, & Cooper, 1990). If a learner is loaded too heavily in one area, he or she will not have the cognitive energy to devote to other tasks. Educators long have considered cognitive loading in the context of reading, as when students expend so much effort decoding words that they are unable to comprehend the text (O'Connor, 2014), writing, as when students worry so much about their spelling that they cannot compose a cogent paragraph (Graham & Harris, 2011), and math, as when students use all of their cognitive energy on basic computation, leaving them unable to solve a real-world problem (Allsopp et al., 2007). As such, overwhelming negative affect may also drain students of cognitive resources available for academic tasks.

While there appears to be a relationship between learning disabilities and negative feelings such as loneliness, poor self-concept, depression and anxiety, the direction of the relationship remains unclear (Bryan et al., 2004). Negative affect could be an outgrowth of the stresses and strains of living with learning disabilities. Certainly students with learning disabilities experience repeated challenges to success (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004). Conversely, such feelings may have a detrimental impact on learning. Negative emotions may adversely impact cognitive functions such as memory and information processing (Bryan et al., 2004). Feeling states are associated with different forms of cognitive processing, with positive emotions being associated with open-ended

thinking (Turner, Meyer, & Schweinle, 2003). The academic environment is brimming with emotion (e.g., apprehension, pleasure, boredom, discouragement) and how well a child manages such feelings is likely to influence her ability to grasp academic information (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). Moreover, emotion regulation may be particularly relevant to school adjustment (Shields, Ryan, & Cicchetti, 2001). Another possibility is that emotional difficulties mask learning problems (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004). That is, school personnel may see comorbid emotional issues such as anxiety, depression or ADHD as primary and fail to pick up on learning challenges.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2018), there is empirical support for the link between social and emotional functioning and academic attributes (e.g., attitudes, motivation, commitment) and outcomes (e.g., attendance, graduation rates, performance, behavior). Emotions impact learning and achievement (Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006). For example, some students are motivated to reach positive outcomes, whereas others seek to avoid adverse events (Elliot, 1999). Also, achievement goals may be linked to academic outcomes and emotions (Hall, Sampasivam, Muis, & Ranellucci, 2016). Because their learning challenges put them at risk for academic failure, students with SLD may adopt performance-avoidance goals. For example, avoidance strategies were associated with reading tasks for a student with language-learning disabilities (Damico, Abendroth, Nelson, Lynch, & Damico, 2011). Performance-avoidance goals are associated with increased anxiety and learned helplessness, as well as reduced intrinsic motivation and help seeking (Hall et al., 2016). Academic self-efficacy and sense of hope may

contribute to increased willingness to work hard and expend effort on academics (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006).

In addition, self-regulation plays a key role in academic achievement (Ursache, Blair, & Raver, 2012). The academic environment can stimulate strong feelings, the management of which influences a student's capacity to learn. (Calkins & Mackler, 2011; Graziano et al., 2007). Students with adaptive emotion regulation skills may more effectively cope with the emotional demands of school and thus be less vulnerable to emotion-related disruptions in cognitive functioning (Graziano et al., 2007; Gumora & Arsenio, 2002; Howse, Calkins, Anastopoulos, Keane, & Shelton, 2003; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). Teachers rate social skills such as the ability to control one's temper, listen to peers, comply with directions and shift smoothly between activities as critical for school success (Lane, Wehby, & Cooley, 2006). These findings may be salient for students with SLD, given that school may be associated with increased instances of intense emotional arousal (e.g., frustration, anxiety).

Emotional health and positive emotions benefit learning and adjustment at school. Strong social skills and interpersonal relationships, fewer risky behaviors, and greater family involvement appear to protect students with learning disabilities from leaving school without finishing (Doren, Murray, & Gau, 2014; Werner, 1993). Connectedness to parents and school, as well as religious identity, may serve as buffer against emotional distress and violent activity for youth with SLD (Svetaz, Ireland, & Blum, 2000; Werner, 1993). Children with disabilities who have a teacher who encourages and motivates them to persevere may become more proficient at reading than those who do not (Greulich et al., 2014).

The School Counselor's Role

As they do with all students, school counselors need to attend to the needs of students with SLD in the academic, career, and social-emotional realms. In the following section, we address specific strategies for doing so, drawing on our current knowledge of the unique needs of students with SLD.

Academic Development

School counselors can contribute to the academic development of students in a number of ways, beginning with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. While school counselors do not perform educational or psychological assessment, they do receive training related to advocacy, group dynamics, strengths-based interventions and communication skills, rendering them important contributors to the IEP meetings (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008; Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007). For example, training related to engaging with students and families helps school counselors advocate for all participants to have a voice. Furthermore, they can endeavor to ensure that personal-social issues such as those outlined previously are addressed in the IEP as needed. This can be done by including related goals and addressing those goals through school counseling interventions or consultation and collaboration with relevant stakeholders. Once the assessment process is complete and IEP is in place, school counselors play a valuable role in academic counseling, working with the student and team to provide information and guidance related to the optimal educational program to meet the student's needs, strengths and goals (Hott, Thomas, Abbassi, Hendricks, & Aslina, 2014).

School counselors may also help students build critical competencies, such as study, decision-making and organizational skills. Moreover, there is considerable research on the importance of self-determination, and deficits in this area that students with SLD often exhibit (Carter, Lane, Pierson, & Stang, 2008; Zheng, Gaumer Erickson, Kingston, & Noonan, 2014). Self-determination is comprised of seven elements, including choice making, decision making, goal setting and attainment, problem solving, self-advocacy and leadership skills, self-awareness and self-knowledge, and self-management and self-regulation skills (Carter et al., 2008). Students benefit from training in skills in self-advocacy, which will be a lifelong process (Geddes Hall, 2015). Coaching in self-advocacy skills helps students learn to ask appropriately for help when needed (Hatch, Shelton, & Monk, 2009; Mitcham, Portman, & Dean, 2009). Students with learning disabilities often spend their entire school career not understanding the meaning of disability labels (Lambie & Milsom, 2010). Providing students with education related to their distinctive learning needs, helping them to understand their strengths and to set their own goals, as well as giving them an active role in the IEP meeting, are important elements in students developing self-awareness and having the knowledge needed to effectively self-advocate (Woods, Martin, & Humphry, 2013).

Because adjusting to change can be particularly difficult for students with SLD, school counselors can play a key role in preparation for transitions or times of flux . Students with SLD may require additional support moving from one school level to the next, as well as between general and special education settings (Milsom, 2007). These types of changes require the ability to adapt to different social situations and effectively self-advocate (Milsom). For example, students moving from elementary to middle

school tend to face a less intimate and more demanding environment, requiring a new skill set (Lackaye & Margalit, 2006). For high school and beyond, students with SLD must begin to exhibit self-efficacy in accessing advising to enroll in the most appropriate courses, self-advocate for accommodations that will bolster achievement, and acquire strategies to overcome their specific learning challenges (Bergin & Bergin, 2007).

Students can be educated about what to expect from the transition they are facing, including likely challenges and possible support and resources they could seek.

Students with SLD may benefit from additional time for preparation, repetition and practice of related tasks and skills (Milsom, 2007). Hatch and colleagues (2009) describe a program of empowerment through self-advocacy designed to provide the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for students with disabilities to ask for the help they need. This model involves individual and group counseling that draws on narrative and solution-focused strategies. An additional component addresses parental advocacy. Careful planning and forethought, partially facilitated by school counselors, can help ensure the transitions go smoothly for students with SLD.

College and Career

Like their peers, students with SLD need information on all appropriate college and career options. It should not be assumed that high school graduation is an end point. College is not necessarily the desired outcome for all students. However, given the fact that students with special needs tend to gravitate toward postsecondary vocational training instead of college (Kushner et al., 2011), it is important to make sure they are not being channeled toward vocational training without adequate exploration of the range of opportunities available to them. Indeed, students' beliefs about their

competencies and future goals are influenced by the attitudes of others (Lambie & Milsom, 2010) and students with SLD may need additional support to pursue postsecondary options (Milsom & Hartley, 2005).

There is evidence that students with SLD demonstrate lower career maturity (Castellanos & Septowski, 2005) and are less acquainted with the world of work than their typically developing peers (Trainor, Smith, & Kim, 2012). Furthermore, career development for high school students with learning disabilities is hindered by a number of factors, including poor academic skills, low self-awareness, limited career knowledge and decreased autonomy and self-sufficiency (Chen & Chan, 2014; Trainor et al., 2012). One particular constraint is inadequate understanding of how the SLD might impact their life in the world of work (Hitchings & Retish, 2000). Social skills deficits also present a challenge, since they contribute so crucially to performance at work (Chen & Chan, 2014; Keith & Stiffler, 2004). For example, emotional regulation and solid coping skills are crucial to handling frustrations that arise on the job. Knowing how to build rapport is essential to collaborative working relationships. Focused, active listening is required to successfully understand job tasks and carry them out. School counselors are adept at assisting students in developing work-related social skills.

IDEA requires transition planning for postsecondary activities and it is crucial that school counselors collaborate with team members to address this issue. With their training in career and lifespan development, school counselors have the skills to contribute meaningfully to the IEP and Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) teams (Milsom, 2007). The career development of students obtaining special education

services are unique and call for focused interventions that take into account their specific strengths, interests and talents (Quigney & Studer, 1998).

One study found that parents of students with disabilities perceived the schools as providing more limited work and career exploration to their children as compared to their peers (Skaff, Kemp, Sternesky McGovern, & Fantacone, 2016). These same parents desired increased exposure to role models with disabilities and real-world experiences in the world of work. This study also examined the perceptions of educators, who expressed concern that transition support fell too heavily on the special educator, a finding that supports increased involvement for the school counselor. Both parents and educators expressed beliefs that schools needed to do more to tailor transition plan goals to the unique needs of the student with SLD and to develop attainable goals.

Career assessment is foundational to career guidance work (Dipeolu, Hargrave, Sniatecki, Donaldson, 2012). Targeted assessment may be particularly useful for students with SLD, given previously mentioned deficits in self- and career awareness (Trainor et al., 2012). Yet, limited research exists on the applicability of existing career inventories for use with students with SLD, since most inventories were not developed and normed with this population in mind (Dipeolu et al., 2012; Chen & Chan, 2014). One study found preliminary evidence for the reliability and construct validity of the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI; Sampson, Peterson, Lenz, Reardon, & Saunders, 1996), the Career Maturity Inventory–Revised (CMI-R; Crites & Savickas, 1996), and My Vocational Situation (MVS; Holland, Daiger, & Power, 1980) (Dipeolu, 2007; Dipeolu et al., 2012). However, norms for students with learning disabilities also appear to differ

significantly from those without (Dipeolu et al., 2007). Given possible limitations, school counselors might consider additional sources of information, including interviewing the students about their needs, interests, and aspirations, as well as talking with parents and teachers (Skaff et al., 2016).

Guidance curriculum is an ideal method of working with students on career exploration, goal setting, career planning (Mitcham et al., 2009). Chen and Chan (2014) propose a four-phase career guidance model that begins with information gathering. This includes the typical process of assessing ability, skills and interests. The second phase in the model pertains to exploring career maturity, followed by a step that promotes development of career maturity. This may include investigation of career and work activities. The final phase involves a follow up to monitor progress.

In addition, school counselors can increase the career knowledge of students with SLD by promoting summer and afterschool work experiences (Trainor et al., 2012). Such job exposure is especially critical for students with disabilities (Carter, Trainor, Cakiroglu, Swedeen, & Owens, 2010). This may be achieved by forging community connections with employers who might be invested in functioning as work and career mentors for students with SLD (Trainor et al., 2012), or creating community service opportunities and partnerships with area technical education centers (Skaff et al., 2016).

For students planning to attend college, additional support may be needed. Research has found that students with learning disabilities who had well-developed ITPs, and who were taught how to engage in self-advocacy around their learning needs, were more likely to seek out and receive the supports and services they need when they enrolled in 2- or 4-year colleges (Newman & Madaus, 2015). Students may need

additional support related to college test preparation and college applications, as well as around the transition to college, potential challenges, different rules and procedures regarding access to special education services, and available support (Kushner et al., 2011; Owens et al., 2011). Students may be encouraged to visit colleges and forge connections early in an effort to ease some of the stress of the transition. Whether college-bound or on a vocational track, self-advocacy and assertiveness become especially crucial at this time (Milsom & Glanville, 2010; Owens et al., 2011), particularly in terms of knowledge of their specific disability and disability legislation (Trainor, Morningstar, & Murray, 2016).

Social-Emotional Development

More research is needed to untangle the relationship between social-emotional factors and academic outcomes for students with learning disabilities. But it seems clear that we must recognize the reciprocal interaction between emotions and learning, and its impact on academic outcomes. Given the social-emotional challenges that students with learning disabilities face, as well as the potential impact of social-emotional characteristics as protective factors, it is crucial that schools provide multidimensional support programs that attend to students' social-emotional needs. Counseling interventions may provide valuable support for students working on such issues, but school counselors must consider how to tailor the activities to the unique learning styles of students with SLD (Geddes Hall, 2015).

Responsive services. Given the nature of their training, as well as their high caseloads, school counselors are not equipped to offer long term therapeutic services, yet, they are often the first point of contact for students who are struggling in the social-

emotional realm. Knowing that their school counselor supports and accepts them may increase a student's willingness to share their concerns, helping to overcome the avoidance behaviors so common with students with specific learning disabilities (Bergin & Bergin, 2007). This sharing of social and emotional difficulties is the first step in getting students help. For students with significant emotional challenges, school counselors can assist in the referral process, working to help students connect with supports outside of the school setting to address these concerns.

Responsive services provided by school counselors include short term, targeted counseling. School counselors should not underestimate the importance of giving the student with SLD a place to be heard and valued. Students who feel accepted by their school counselor can explore their feelings, insecurities and challenges and begin to work toward solutions. Within this supportive environment, counselors can help students gain valuable self-awareness and question maladaptive self-perceptions. In order to create this nonjudgmental space, it is essential that school counselors develop awareness of their own attitudes and biases regarding students with SLD (Durodoye, Combes, & Bryant, 2004). School counselors must take the time to explicitly examine how they include students with SLD in their comprehensive counseling programs, since those who do so may be the most successful at forging meaningful relationships with this population (Pattison, 2010).

Psychoeducational interventions. Psychoeducational and cognitive-behavioral interventions hold value for informing students about their particular SLD, examining personal strengths and talents, individual planning and goal setting, enhancing feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy, and teaching skills such as positive self-talk. In

advocating for the use of narrative counseling techniques, Lambie and Milsom (2010) observe that students with SLD may absorb negative messages about their skills, abilities and potential from their environment. Coupled with a seemingly endless stream of frustrating learning experiences, including negative feedback about their efforts and abilities, students may develop personal narratives that feed poor self-concept and limit potential. Narrative techniques such as mapping the influence of the problem, externalizing the problem, examining strengths, and looking for unique outcomes, help students create a personal story in which they are successful, capable learners (Hatch et al., 2009; Lambie and Milsom, 2010).

Social-emotional learning. It is particularly crucial for educators to consider the impact of social-emotional learning for students with SLD, given that these students may have more difficulties in this area. Feuerborn and Tyre (2009) divide instruction in social emotional skills into four areas: emotional knowledge, emotional expression, empathy, and social problem solving. Elksnin and Elksnin (2006) break things down a bit differently, identifying key instructional areas as nonverbal communication, emotional understanding, and social-emotional problem solving. They observe that nonverbal communication skills (i.e., paralanguage, facial expressions, posture and gestures, interpersonal distance/space, rhythm, and time) must be mastered before instruction in understanding feelings. This type of instruction may include learning to discriminate tone of voice, reading facial expressions, and the impact of body language and personal space. With regard to bolstering emotional understanding, Elksnin and Elksnin note the need for intervention in both recognizing and labeling feelings. Likewise, Feuerborn and Tyre (2009) highlight the difficulty children with SLD might have identifying what they

are feeling and recommend helping them recognize the interplay of thoughts, bodily sensations, and feelings. After this, students benefit from help learning how to convey feelings to others in a socially appropriate manner, which may include training in coping with intense feelings (Feuerborn & Tyre). Both sets of authors convey that feeling recognition includes reading the feeling states of others, and Feuerborn and Tyre explicitly address the importance of cultivating empathy using games like “feeling charades” and role-plays.

Students may also need explicit instruction in social problem solving (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2006; Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). This is in keeping with the finding that children with learning disabilities have difficulty with social problem solving, particularly deficits encoding nonverbal social cues and using these cues to interpret emotions, as well as choosing an effective response to solve a problem (Galway & Metsala, 2011). These findings highlight the potential utility of interventions aimed at developing skills at reading and appropriately interpreting social cues, and implementing competent responses to problems (Galway & Metsala). Social cooperation (e.g., using suitable tone, cooperating with others) and self-control (e.g., ending disagreements calmly, sidestepping potentially problematic situations, controlling temper, and responding appropriate to criticism) have also been identified as capacities to develop, as these skills may impact school enjoyment and relationships with teachers (Lane et al., 2006; Milsom & Glanville, 2010). Research tells us that students enjoy learning when they view it as controllable and valuable (Pekrun, 2006), and school counselors can work with students to develop perceptions of competence and personal control over academic activities and outcomes. School counselors can also help students recognize

and understand their feelings, such as their anger at feeling anxious about taking a test, develop strategies to regulate negative emotions when they arise, and bolster coping skills to use when faced with to cope with instructional stressors.

Social and emotional interventions may be provided in individual or group formats (small groups and guidance curriculum). Arman (2002) details a structured group for middle school students with mild disabilities, aimed at enhancing resiliency through developing supportive connections. Social and character development programs, such as the PATHS curriculum, contribute to the advancement of social-emotional skills and pro-social behavior (Crean & Johnson, 2013). Optimal social and emotional learning occurs within the context of developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, and systemically supported interventions (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). It is essential to select social skills programs that have empirical support and to recognize that it takes time for the programs to become part of the school culture (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009; Milsom & Glanville, 2010). The *2013 CASEL Guide* details 23 school-based (pre-school and elementary school) social and emotional learning programs, with a focus on evidence-based programs that benefit all students and are integrated into the normal school day by existing personnel. The guide offers a systematic framework for evaluating the quality of classroom-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and presents best practices for district and school teams on how to select and carry out social and emotional learning programs (CASEL, 2013). When researching programs, it is important to consider whether outcome studies included students from the special education population. For

example, the PATHS curriculum has evidence supporting its utility with students in special education classrooms (Kam, Greenberg, & Kusche, 2004).

Because children with SLD may struggle with social-emotional learning and be less adaptable in skill application (Keith & Stiffler, 2004), they will likely need additional support beyond guidance curriculum lessons. Social skills training should include assessment of whether students lack the skill altogether, or possess it but fail to use it with consistency (Elksnin, 1996; Gresham, 2015). The school counselor can then tailor individual SEL instruction to provide more explicit instruction and practice. To ensure skills solidification and generalizability, school counselors should take steps to coordinate with teachers and parents to increase opportunities for skill demonstration, feedback, and reinforcement (Elksnin, 1996). Group counseling formats present students with opportunities to gain experience practicing new skills in a supportive and safe environment (Milsom, 2007; Stephens, Jain, & Kim, 2010). Framing the experience as an activity group and including well-regarded peers can bolster the acceptance of group participation (Mehaffey & Sandberg, 1992; Stephens et al., 2010).

Social support networks. Perceptions of social support impact the school experience for students with SLD, and school counselors can consult with teachers and other support staff to foster supportive connections between struggling students and their classroom teachers (Martinez, 2006). Encouraging relationships with family and school serve as a notable protective factor against emotional distress (Svetaz et al., 2000) and school dropout (Doren et al., 2014). This is particularly important given the often tenuous relationships between students with disabilities and significant others, such as teachers and classmates (Arman, 2002). Consultation with general education

teachers regarding social-emotional issues that impact student learning is also important, as these crucial supports may be less familiar with the challenges students with SLD face (Tarver-Behring, Spagna, & Sullivan, 1998). Significant adults may inappropriately tag learning issues as behavioral problems, as when a child who has problems with sequencing fumbles trying to execute multi-step instructions. Conversely, they may miss problematic emotional issues (e.g., poor concentration associated with depression) by attributing them to a learning issue.

Likewise, parents of children with learning disabilities often experience high levels of stress and isolation, as well as difficulty coping (Shechtman & Gilate, 2005). While psychoeducational groups are the predominant intervention for these parents, there is evidence of significant benefits, such as reduced stress and improved coping, from the support provided by time-limited counseling groups (Daninon & Shechtman, 2012; Shechtman & Gilate, 2005). In particular, it seems to be a primary mechanism by which groups work through bolstering connection with others (Danino & Shechtman, 2012). With this in mind, even if running parent groups is not possible, school counselors may do well to engage in outreach to parents of students with learning disabilities in order to facilitate feelings of connection and support for this often isolated group.

Additional Considerations for Interventions

The social-emotional, academic, and career needs outlined previously can be addressed using individual, group counseling and guidance curriculum formats. Whichever format is used, students with SLD may struggle with issues such as comprehension, organizing their thoughts and communication (Lambie & Milsom, 2010).

As such, school counselors need to be prepared to modify their approaches. For example, non-verbal activities such as art, drama and pantomime offer alternative methods of interaction that suit the learning style of students with SLD (Bryan et al., 2004). In addition, for children with non-verbal learning disabilities, such activities may provide needed skill development in terms of interpreting nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language. Group interventions provide the added benefit of sharing of experiences and supportive connections with peers (Bergin & Bergin, 2007; Martinez, 2006). Group-based learning regarding self-advocacy, the nature of SLD and the like may be most useful when it combines psycho-education with experiential activities such as role-plays (Bergin & Bergin, 2007).

School climate issues are also critical. Students with SLD need to feel that school is a positive place (Mitcham et al., 2009), and the experiences of this population are shaped in part by the attitudes and behavior of others (Milsom, 2006). The school counselor must assess school climate issues for students with SLD and make alterations as needed (Milsom). This involves assessing attitudes, behaviors and biases of all participants. They must also understand culture-specific beliefs that impact parental attitudes related to special education. Guidance curriculum lessons related to learning disabilities and special education is crucial, since students with SLD often experience negative attitudes from peers and teachers (Lambie & Milsom, 2010). Teachers may have low expectations or inadvertently limit options for students with SLD, or may feel unprepared to work with them (Milsom, 2006). Peers may engage in bullying or other insensitive behavior. School counselors may address these issues through guidance curriculum, consultation, and in-service trainings. They may bring

important climate issues to the attention of administration and encourage support for professional development as needed.

Finally, when counseling goals are included in the IEP, school counselors must be able to articulate them in a manner that is positive, observable, and measurable. This may require more up front assessment than is typical, including behavior rating scales or targeted classroom observation in order to establish a baseline. A presenting concern such as “poor social skills” must be broken down and articulated in behavioral terms (e.g., interrupts when peers are talking 80% of the time). From there, the school counselor can formulate an achievable goal to move towards. An IEP goal must be written to indicate the behavior the child will learn (e.g., engage in turn-taking in conversation with a peer) rather than describe what the child will stop doing.

Conclusion

School counselors have the skills to provide important services to students with disabilities and to their teachers. Children with SLD are vulnerable to poor post-school academic and social outcomes if they do not receive the supports that they need to be successful. The activities in which school counselors feel most prepared to engage, such as individual and group counseling, referrals and services on teams, counseling for parents and families (Milsom, 2002) and teacher consultation (Nichter and Edmonson (2005) are among those that can help students with LD have a more positive school experience.

Still, there are areas in which school counselors evince hesitation to provide support, such as social skills training and transition planning (Milsom, 2002). Although school counselors report that they rarely engage in these activities, their training has

prepared them well for leading them. We urge school counselors to collaborate at the school level so that they may find ways to participate with the teams providing transition and social skills development to students with disabilities.

Children with learning disabilities frequently exist at the margins in their school communities. They struggle to keep up with their peers academically, and often to connect with them socially. Their general education teachers often misunderstand them. School can become a context fraught with fear, anxiety, and anger and the very nature of SLD can leave them without the skills to adaptively manage and cope with this experience. Making sure students with SLD are part of a comprehensive school counseling program promotes the chances for optimal developmental outcomes.

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