Special education terms and procedures all new teachers should know


by Cheryl Abney

This Special Education Terminology 101 session is designed for you - the beginning teacher. You have completed your internship and received your BS degree in education. Still, you'll find your first year of teaching is your greatest learning curve, particularly in reference to your special education students. How will you meet their special needs? What is your function at their scheduled meetings? New Teachers may feel overwhelmed and intimidated when attending their first IEP (Individual Education Plan) meeting. Listening to seasoned special education people converse is like hearing a foreign language, computer lingo or military jargon - incomprehensible to the novice listener.

Consider sitting at the table of your first IEP meeting and hearing the staffing specialist say, "We have a huge job with this new RtI emphasis. LEAs need organize an S-BIT first. We don't want any repercussions from the REDs. We can't just fix a child with a quick CBE and label them EBD or SLD. We need to follow ESE procedure and respect NCLB and IDEA."

The exaggerated example above can be translated to read, "We have a huge job with this new Response to Intervention emphasis. Local Education Agents need organize a School Based Response to Intervention Team first. We don't want any repercussions from the Regional Education Directors. We can't just fix a child with a quick Curriculum Based Evaluation and label them Emotional/Behavioral Disabled or Specific Learning Disabled. We need to follow Exceptional Student Education procedure and respect No Child Left Behind and the Individuals With Disabilities Act." Obviously, this expanded version is too lengthy and just as overwhelming to the uninformed listener.

Like cell phone text message abbreviations, acronyms help simplify communication within the special education realm. Initially, the novice listener may feel that they entered a door to another dimension, but new teachers will soon find themselves navigating the special education language smoothly if they take the time to be informed. Consider the following a brief course in Special Education Terminology 101.

BIP (Behavior Intervention Plan) - A BIP is completed by the guidance counselor with an assembled team to discuss target behaviors and plan interventions. An intervention is what you will do to help your student overcome their behavioral problem. Emotional/behavioral disabled children will have a BIP in place, and their IEP (individual education plan) will indicate counseling as a related service.

CST (Child Study Team) - A CST identifies a team that generally consists of the teacher, the parent, principal or asst. principal, and guidance counselor. This team may also be identified as the EPT (Educational Planning Team), SAT (Student Assistance Team), guidance committee or whatever name dictated by your school district. The purpose of the child study team is to discuss your student's problem and identify how you and the parent can help them succeed.

ESE (Exceptional Student Education) - The ESE department identifies and oversees special programs for exceptional students, those students who require special instruction and/or related services such as speech or language therapy, physical therapy and occupational therapy.

IEP (Individual Education Plan) - An IEP identifies a student's strengths and challenges, annual goals, objectives and related services. Placement setting, state test participation, need for extended school year, and
transition services will also be determined. If an IEP is scheduled to discuss a formal evaluation that qualifies a student for ESE placement, it is considered to be a staffing. For those students identified as gifted, the meeting is identified as an EP (Educational Plan) rather than an IEP.

504 Plans provide for the needs of students with a physical or mental condition that substantially limits a major life activity. Major life activities are seeing, hearing, breathing, and walking, as well as learning. Examples of handicaps that fall under the 504 umbrella include cerebral palsy, epilepsy, cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and ADD/ADHD. Conditions representing a handicap warranting a 504 Plan are broad, unlike the specified disabilities covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA). Note that an IEP supersedes a 504, so a student will not have both an IEP and a 504. (1)

NCLB (No Child Left Behind) is the basis of inclusion classrooms. Rather than separating students with disabilities from NDS (non-disabled students), an inclusion classroom serves students with and without disabilities together. It is based on the premise that all children can learn. This law was designed to provide all students a fair and equal opportunity to receive a quality education. (2) Suzanne Heath, author of "A Parent's Guide to The No Child Left Behind Act," states that the "NCLB emphasizes accountability and teaching methods that work. A large focus of this law is on reading achievement." (3) You can see that the responsibility falls upon the shoulders of schools and qualified teachers to meet their students' individual needs.

FAPE (Free and Appropriate Education) is the law of entitlement for all students eligible for special education services. "Appropriate" relates to where a child is best served; in an inclusion classroom, additional time in a resource room, in a separate class altogether, or at a special school. The least restrictive environment must be provided. If a child can function in an inclusion classroom with the necessary accommodations, you would not place them in a separate classroom.

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 2004 identifies the specific disabilities (or exceptionalities) served by special education departments. As a general education teacher, you may have the most contact with the following exceptionalities - listed alphabetically.

ASD - Autistic Spectrum Disorder
D/HH - Deaf/Hard of Hearing
EBD - Emotional/Behavioral Disability
ELP - Extended Learning Program (gifted)
LI - Language Impaired
OHI - Other Health Impaired
OI - Orthopedically Impaired
OT - Occupational Therapy
PT - Physical Therapy
SI - Speech Impaired
SLD - Specific Learning Disabilities
VI - Visually Impaired

In addition to your knowledge of some special education terms, the following are important facts to know before attending your first meeting.

(1) Every special education student has an IEP (Individual Education Plan). This plan outlines the goals and objectives for the next twelve months that will help the student academically.
(2) An annual IEP meeting is held for each student with a disability. In addition to the staffing specialist, meetings usually include the principal or assistant principal, guidance counselor, general education teacher, special education teacher, therapists, parents, and the student at the middle school and high school grade levels. Elementary teachers may want to ask and record at the beginning of the school year how their
students answer the required IEP question, "What do they want to learn this school year?" Keeping the list in a special education binder along with your students' IEPs will provide you a useful resource.

(3) The general education teacher is expected to come to the meeting prepared to tell the team how the student is progressing academically and behaviorally.

Data that should be brought to the IEP meeting includes test results, work samples, and progress reports.

(4) The procedure of "referring a child for special education services" in no longer an appropriate reference. The acceptable concept is identified as RtI (Response to Intervention). As educators, our emphasis is not on identifying a child we hope to "fix" through formal evaluations, labeling, and special education teachers. General education efforts aim to identify how we can intervene and meet a particular student's learning needs so they can realize academic success without referral to the special education department.

(5) Accommodations are interventions you provide the student while they are assigned the same level work and curriculum as the other students. Modifications occur when you change the curriculum to a lower grade level or different set of texts, materials.

Now that you have completed this short Special Education Terminology 101 session, you probably feel besieged by terminology overload. Albert Einstein said that the "Only source of knowledge is experience." Consider your first year of teaching as an opportunity to grow in knowledge as you nurture your students - each one uniquely special in their own way - and you're well on your way to a rewarding and memorable career.

Works Cited


