

A Transformative Investigation of an Inclusive and Positive IEP Framework

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Abstract

In British Columbia, inspired and guided by Shelley Moore and her inclusionary and consultative efforts, a working group of school districts piloted a competency-based Individual Education Plan (IEP). This new IEP is to support the inclusion of students into a positive learning experience. Five years after this implementation phase and the acceptance of this IEP within the BC provincial system, a mixed-method study can investigate what changes are noticed when a competency-based IEP is implemented, who notices these changes, and do these changes extend beyond the IEP design phase. The transformative approach will best investigate these phenomena as the IEP is to support students from kindergarten to grade twelve who require additional support through special targeted funding. Student's voice is central to the competency-based IEP and can be central to this investigation. Care, therefore, for the student participants and centralizing their voice is essential within the study. Awareness on the part of the researcher will be critical to creating the space for student voice. The transformative approach can investigate whether a competency-based IEP promotes a more inclusive learning environment and/or a more positive learning experience. Findings indicating a more inclusive and positive learning experience deserve comprehensive knowledge mobilization so that more students within the kindergarten to grade twelve sectors may flourish.

Keywords: research proposal, strength-based inclusion, competency-based individual education plan, knowledge mobilization

1. Introduction

A strength-based approach for including students within a school's learning environment is an aspiration within Kindergarten to Grade Twelve jurisdictions. The individual education plan (IEP), a legal and policy-bound tool, can be a visible artifact of inclusionary learning experiences. Since the onset of the IEP in Canada, a student's psycho-educational or medical diagnosis informed the goals, objectives, and strategies within the plan [1]. Developing an IEP based on these

assessments develop a deficit approach toward learning [2]. The deficit approach is grounded within the medical model which perceives disability as an individual issue stemming from biomedical conditions that place them at a disadvantage [3].

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education and Childcare policy advocates for an inclusive education system where students with diverse abilities fully engage as members of the learning community. Inclusion ensures that all students have equal access to learning, achievement, and excellence in every aspect of their educational experience [4]. The BC curriculum was redesigned so that:

"[a]ll areas of learning are based on a Know-Do-Understand model to support a concept-based competency-driven approach to learning" [5].

This competency-driven approach to learning created the framework for the competency-based IEP (CbIEP) designed by inclusion activist Moore [6], as she recognized the need for a new tool to guide inclusion.

This research proposal reviews key literature and presents a transformative research design to investigate the competency-based IEP. The proposal outlines an investigation of the inclusive and positive changes observed following the implementation of a competency-based IEP. Further, it outlines a process to investigate who notices changes and do these changes extend beyond the IEP design phase. It also explores how researchers can centralize student voice. Further, it discusses the next steps to guide this investigation so that research findings may be shared through knowledge mobilization.

2. Literature Review

The IEP is an established document within the education sector situated within comprehensive theory and practice [7]. A new approach to the IEP is a framework designed to promote an inclusive and positive learning experience. Literature exploring strength-based inclusion, self-determination theory, and competency-based learning provides the underpinnings

for this new framework. Key themes within the literature promoting inclusive and positive learning environments are reviewed.

2.1. Strength-based inclusion

Strength-based inclusion is embedded within the tenets of positive psychology and is becoming the commonly accepted approach within K-12 schools in British Columbia, other Canadian, and international jurisdictions. Rooted in the work of Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi [8] positive psychology at the individual level, espouses positive subjective experiences like well-being, contentment, and satisfaction from the past, promoting a sense of flow and happiness in the present, and fostering hope and optimism for the future. This involves nurturing positive individual skills. Initially, positive psychology focused on human strengths and well-being, developing measures for constructs like life satisfaction and positive emotions [9]. Later, research recognized the interplay of positive and negative aspects of life and the importance of cultural context [9]. Since 2015, there's been a shift towards understanding well-being in dynamic, multidimensional contexts and embracing post-disciplinary approaches to address global challenges [9].

Set within the tenets of positive psychology, Wehmeyer [10] considers the influence of the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (2001). This classification shifted the focus of disability from internal pathology within the individual to the interaction between one's capabilities and the supportive environment [10]. The shift promoted a paradigm of support emphasizing the enhancement of personal capacity, modification of environments to promote participation, and the provision of the supports required to enable individuals to function successfully in typical environments and activities.

Taylor and Sailor discuss the research that replaces the medical model, rooted in a deficit-based approach, with the social model approach to disability [11]. This newer approach focuses on leveraging student strengths and adapting to the learning environment, as exemplified by Universal Design for Learning. The focus has shifted from fixing student deficits to addressing barriers in physical, social, and academic environments for success.

Positive psychology interventions in schools, that is the merging of pedagogy with a strength-based approach, according to Kumar and Modhdeen [12], increase student well-being and academic performance. A strength-based approach entails boosting proficiency, frequency, and regulation within interventions. Xuechen [1] demonstrates there is still deficit-based

language and an unequal distribution of power in the IEP document and process. Promoting student self-determination is a path to optimizing positive intervention.

2.2. Self-determination

Wehmeyer discusses how self-determination is a student's opportunity to make or cause things to happen in their own lives, rather than rely on another person [10]. Students with a disability who have self-determination achieve better school outcomes, with a more positive quality of life, and life satisfaction. Shogren et al. encourage teaching self-determination skills like problem-solving, goal-setting, and self-management to enrich the curriculum and enhance student engagement and achievement [10].

Deci and Ryan highlight the influence of competence, relatedness, and autonomy within self-determination theory [13]. They explain that autonomy involves initiative and ownership within the learning process, supported by intrinsic value and hindered by external control. Competence relates to mastery and growth with learning, thriving in structured environments with feedback. Relatedness involves belonging and respect as the student is situated within the class environment in connection to their teacher and peers. Self-determination theory evaluates educational settings based on how they fulfill or frustrate these needs.

Krettenauer and Curren develop the understanding of self-determination theory as an empirically grounded and organismic framework that addresses human motivation, development, and well-being [14]. This theory emphasizes the importance of social conditions in either fostering or hindering human flourishing. It relies on evidence-based insights and rigorous psychological research methods. Although it aligns with other psychological theories in some respects, self-determination theory is distinct in its emphasis on intrinsic motivation. It views individuals as proactive beings who are inherently motivated to explore and integrate crucial aspects of their environment.

Shogren et al. explore developments in the study of students with disabilities in the last decade and an application of causal agency theory which positions self-determination within the layers of human agency and emphasizes self-determined action [15]. The research delves into self-initiation, self-direction, and the role of beliefs regarding the connection between actions and goals, offering additional context for defining and supporting self-determined action. Autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization are essential characteristics of the functional model of self-determination and are integral to causal agency theory. These characteristics

are also foundational within competency-based learning.

2.3. Competency-based learning

Competency as an attribute within self-determination is the motivating attribute to engage within the learning process based on a drive to effectively interact with, influence, and navigate the environment [15]. Competency-based learning is an educational method that prioritizes standards and student-driven learning with a focus on real-life applications. Sullivan and Downey [16] examine how this approach integrates direct instruction, peer collaboration, and self-regulated learning through self-assessment. Also referred to as performance-based, mastery-based, and individualized learning, assessments are designed to authentically showcase the application of knowledge and skills, spanning from short tasks to extensive, complex projects.

Similarly, Scheopner Torres et al. [17] note that while there is no single definition of competency-based learning, its models share common features. This approach requires students to show mastery to earn credit and progress based on demonstrated proficiency. Assessments are comprehensive, focusing on applying knowledge rather than rote memorization. Credits are not solely based on classroom time; alternative pathways, such as apprenticeships and career programs, provide varied learning opportunities.

In British Columbia, competency-based learning includes two key aspects [5]: first, curricular competencies, which define the content knowledge and skills students should acquire and apply; and second, core competencies, which cover intellectual, personal, social, and emotional skills essential for profound, lifelong learning. Core competencies guide how students engage with curricular competencies and are interrelated, with each one impacting the development of the others. These core competencies are cultivated through engagement with the curriculum making them integral to the learning process.

3. Research Design

An evaluative research study can determine if a competency-based IEP (CbIEP) is promoting an inclusive and positive learning experience. Merten [18] explains how:

“[t]he transformative paradigm is one philosophical framework that helps to organize thinking about how evaluation can serve the interests of social justice through the production of credible evidence that is responsive to the needs of marginalized communities”.

Silverman et al. discuss the use of ‘marginalized communities’ in research [19]. They explain that viewing systemically marginalized individuals solely through a deficit-based lens restricts their potential and the scope of an investigative study [19]. In response, researchers can use a strength-based approach to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of stigmatized individuals. Further, they propose that a strength-based approach highlights the limitations of research that focuses solely on individuals' deficiencies [19]. A socially just underpinning for marginalized participants aligns with the purpose of the CbIEP. Philosophical assumptions underlying this evaluative study are that humans have dignity and warrant a learning environment and experience where they can flourish. The axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings of the transformative paradigm champion these assumptions.

Merton explains that within the transformative paradigm, the axiological assumption maintains that the primary purpose of evaluation is to advance human rights and social justice [18]. To achieve these goals, research is to engage participants in culturally appropriate ways and identify elements supporting or hindering human rights and social justice. Further Mertens and Catsambas assert that ethical research shifts the researcher's role from assessing post-intervention to collaborating with stakeholders from the start, embedding evaluation as a continuous, strategic process for systemic change [20]. Within this proposal, the CbIEP is already a viable framework for inclusive and positive learning, but the evaluation of this framework can adhere to transformative ethical practices such as the fostering of stakeholder relationships and contextual understanding, an appreciative inquiry lens focusing on studying successful experiences and values, and capacity building, data ownership, and sustainability [20].

Researchers are to be aware of power dynamics and cultural differences in the communities within which they work. Special attention should be given to ensure marginalized voices are included throughout the research and as discussed above marginalized voices are to be appreciated for strength-based input. While avoiding overpromising outcomes, researchers can design investigations that leave the community in a better state. Within this study, this would be a better understanding of the CbIEP by and for those students being served by this education plan.

This transformative axiology sets parameters for the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of the research design. Merton further explains that within a transformative ontology, the researcher may recognize various interpretations of reality, question their sources, and assess the implications of favoring one interpretation over another [18]. Moreover, within the

researcher's epistemology is an awareness to establish culturally sensitive relationships with participants, recognizing the power imbalance that can unintentionally filter voices from the evaluation process. Within this research investigation, secondary school students can be included in developing the tools that will be used to gather evidence for the research. Further, the researcher is aware that participants may be skeptical due to past negative experiences and exclusion by those controlling learning systems.

Further, the transformative paradigm establishes a methodological approach using a mixed methods evaluation of the CbIEP. A mixed methods study can capture the complex phenomenon at play within the IEP process. Specifically, to investigate who notices changes within the IEP process and do these changes extend beyond the IEP design phase to include the implementation and operationalize the IEP. With an initial focus on qualitative assessment and dialogue to understand the cultural context, the study can integrate qualitative and quantitative data to allow for responsiveness to diverse participants and issues, emphasizing the importance of methods that suit the cultural groups involved. Secondary school students can be included in the design of the interview questions as they will be the best suited to select the language that will make sense to interviewees. A cyclical design is recommended to incorporate interim findings throughout the evaluation study. The credibility of the evidence is tied to using methods, particularly qualitative ones, that uncover cultural norms and inform decisions on inclusive participant involvement. The mixed methods design as outlined by Creswell will include an integration of open-ended and closed-ended evidence gathered from interviews, focus groups, and surveys [21]. These multiple data sources will allow for triangulation and a credible evaluation of the CbIEP.

Building on the transformative paradigm, Mirza et al. address ethical considerations for conducting respectful research [22]. These include transparent processes and communication regarding conflicts of interest, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, feedback to participants, and ensuring research credibility through rigorous investigation [22].

4. Discussion

Districts implementing the CbIEP gathered testimonies from students and families about the benefit of this strength-based design. The BC Ministry of Education and Childcare endorsed this new IEP creating access to the tool within their online provincial database. As the CbIEP is yet to be analyzed, it is difficult to list the design's pivotal benefits. There are insights from the preliminary testimonies of students,

parents, and staff. I will outline six aspects; independently any of these changes can support a strength-based approach, and together they are transforming inclusion.

First, the IEP begins with a student profile. This student profile replaces a former section that outlined diagnosis, educational impairment, and background information. The student profile is based on student input and voice. The profile includes the student's photo, a list of the student's interests, and learning preferences, and a description of what educators may need to know about 'me', the student. This section provides dimensions to the student igniting the story of the person within the IEP. Through a methodological lens, the student profile is synonymous with a narrative inquiry that underpins the intentions of individual education planning. Clandinin explains that narrative inquiry:

"is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience" [23].

Second, is the student's self-assessment of how they are performing on the core competencies. Wehmeyer discusses the positive influence of self-determination on school outcomes, quality of life, and life satisfaction [10]. At times, it may be necessary for a student's family or school team to assist with the self-assessment. However, there are established person-centered planning processes such as PATHS and MAPS to gather student input as a meaningful part of an IEP [24]. Formerly, IEPs were based on the standard scores from within 'reliable and valid' norm-referenced psycho-educational assessments. The goals within an IEP were selected based on a student's diagnosis. The medical diagnosis influenced student interventions and the learning environment. The lowest score within an assessment may become the first target for an intervention goal. Wehmeyer, advocating for renewal within inclusive education, emphasizes that it is time to focus on support based on student interests, abilities, and strengths [25]. In the CbIEP, student self-assessment carries an equivalent influence as norm-referenced data and medical diagnosis.

Third, the core competencies of the redesigned BC curriculum are an aspect of change that creates an opportunity for strength-based inclusion. All BC Kindergarten to Grade twelve students are taught to develop competency with a Positive Personal Identity, Personal Responsibility, Social Responsibility, Communication, Critical Thinking, and Creative Thinking. The provincial Student Reporting policy requires that two written learning updates include student reflection on the core

competencies [26]. Developing the core competencies is an expectation for all K-12 students. By using the language of the competencies as the domains of the IEP, support teachers and classroom teachers can collaboratively design lessons to address the needs of the student requiring additional support within the learning of the classroom. Past practice was to assign IEP goals based on domains that aligned with a student's diagnosis. Many IEPs were 11-12 pages long with goals and objectives not connected to classroom learning. Changing the goal areas of the IEP drives the three remaining aspects of the CbIEP.

The fourth aspect of change, supports, allows students to be included in a learning environment with their peers as the goals and objectives of the IEP are not only about specialized 'down the hall supports' but are universal by design and can be modeled and used by all. Rao et al. explain that a universal design for learning offers flexible pathways that enhance inclusion for students requiring specialized support in general education, addressing learner variability by supporting diverse ways of processing and engaging with information [27]. At times students will require essential support such as one-to-one therapy but often even language or sensory-based support can benefit all.

The fifth aspect of change is the strength-based language used to craft the goals. Statements are constructed in "I can" language. Dweck and Yeager provide evidence of the benefits of a growth mindset within education [28]. Within the CbIEP, the goal statement expresses what the student can do once the goal is achieved and begins with 'I can' to emphasize the student is driving the goal. The sixth aspect of change is the design of the objective, and the evidence gathered to demonstrate mastery of the goal. Evidence is presented either through written descriptions or by uploading pictures or video links. Evidence is about capturing the learning more than tallying up how often a task is completed by a specific date.

5. Next Steps

The next step within this research proposal is to seek a research partnership with one or two of the piloting school districts. It is also possible to conduct research with school districts that adopted the IEP since its onset in 2018. Once the partnership is created a review of the research model with a research ethics board will provide appropriate safeguards for the participants within the study. Another step will be to develop interview questions and survey questions. It is possible to apply an appreciative inquiry model to design these tools. Mertens and Catsambas [20] and Dockrill Garrett [29] discuss the benefit of using appreciative inquiry for inclusive education research. This transformative

investigation can focus on the positive aspects of the CbIEP that set it apart from former IEP frameworks.

6. Conclusion

The school districts piloting the CbIEP gathered informal testimonies from students, families, and teachers in support of the changes within this new model. Findings indicating that the competency-based IEP promotes a more inclusive and positive learning environment can influence policy and law so that more jurisdictions adopt a similar IEP model allowing more students to flourish. Evidence supporting that marginalized students are flourishing requires knowledge mobilization so that more jurisdictions may adopt the framework of the BC strength-based and competency-based individual education plan.

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