

A proposal to dismantle normalcy in Indiana by providing a Strength-Based Individualized Learning Plan for Indianapolis Public School special education students and their families

Summary: Normalcy is an issue in most urban public school districts. This is especially the case for African American students labeled by the “Special Ed.” category.

Dismantling normalcy presents an unprecedented and truly transformational concept which can lead to the reduction of special education referrals and outcomes such as suspensions and expulsions.

The Strength-Based Individualized Learning Plan (S-BILP) was fashioned after looking deeply into the historical context of disability concept through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Critical Disability Studies so as to engage Disability Studies in Education.

This research exposed the consistent socio-political agenda that purposely leaves out race, gender, class, and strength-based views of humanity when developing special education policies.

In contrast to 19th and 20th century social constructs of disability and intelligence based on a deficit model of humanity, this proposal challenges the Indianapolis Public School (IPS) and the wider Hoosier community to discredit and abandon normalcy for the 21st century, leading the nation to an enlightened view of our human potential.

Dismantling normalcy reviews and validates the responses—problems, causes, and solutions to disproportionality. This attempt to “re-inventing disability” also presents its own solutions, while it challenges all stakeholders to go deeper into the causes through the use of Critical Race Theory. Deconstructing the concepts of disability and special education is needed to expose the relationship among disproportionality and past and current deficit models of certain students.

The purpose of a S-BILP is to determine the free and appropriate learning choices and goals for a special education student based on their uniqueness, interests, passions, needs, and wants towards self-actualization.

The goal of this initiative is to have an IPS policy where any student can have a strength-based ILP. In 2014, Vermont mandated that students in grades 7-12 each have a Personalized Learning Plan.

Finally, the proposal *per se* suggests a series of community-wide forums to unpack and re-conceptualize the social-political-cultural construct of normalcy and the associated schooling by-products: Special Education and the infamous label “LD.”

“By dismantling the myth of the typical, average, ordinary, or ‘standard’ child, we reveal ways in which educational practices actively contribute to creation of ‘normalcy’ and show the harmful effects that this can have on all citizens.”

~ S. Baglieri, L. Bejoian, A. Broderick, D. Connor & J. Valle
”Disability Studies Unravels the Myth of the Normal Child”

Introduction

"Why is There Learning Disabilities? A Critical Analysis of the Birth of the Field in Its Social Context" can be viewed as the theme of "Re-inventing Disability." This foundational (1987) essay by Christine Sleeter deconstructs the social-political-cultural manipulatives used to reinforce and perpetuate disproportionalities in special education. What is vital, the essay's conclusions challenge the IPS Leadership Team to "revisit" Christine Sleeter's assertion that disability exists only as a socio-political construction, not an ontological reality. Confusing disability with reality is like confusing money with wealth, the map with the territory, or the word with the thing it stands in for.

Understanding why there are learning disabilities will help the IPS Leadership Team to "trouble" existing beliefs and practices not only within the district and state, but within the entire field of special education itself by: 1) placing disability and "normalcy" in its historical context; 2) considering social class and race in the construction of LD; and 3) fostering an open and continual dialogue among the community regarding what schools are for.

The challenge for our Leadership Team is to bring about an IPS policy that enables the creation of a fluid system where uniqueness and difference are "taken for granted" attributes of every child who enters an IPS classroom.

References

Sleeter, C. (1987). Why is there learning disabilities? A critical analysis of birth of the field in its social context. In T. S. Popkewicz (Ed.), *The formation of school subjects: The struggle for creating an American institution* (pp. 210-238). London: Falmer Press.

A Strength-Based ILP for each IPS special education student

IPS teacher aide A: “The ISTEP tests are today. I am worried about Chester. He can’t subtract and he’s a very slow reader. And, he has a hard time paying attention. He’s going to do poorly and this will bring down our school’s test scores I know.”

IPS teacher aide B: “That’s not good. He has a lot of weaknesses. Hey, though... regarding Chester, what can he do?”

IPS teacher aide A: (pausing) ”Well, I... I never thought of that...”

What is an ILP?

- An ILP defines the individualized objectives of a child who has been found with a disability, as defined by the federal [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) (IDEA).
- An ILP is intended to help children reach educational goals more easily than they otherwise would.
- An ILP in all cases must be tailored to the individual student's needs as identified by the ILP evaluation process, and must especially help teachers and related service providers (such as [para-professional educators](#)) understand the student's disability and how the disability affects the learning process.
- An ILP describes how the student learns, how the student best demonstrates that learning and what teachers and service providers will do to help the student learn more effectively.
- An ILP requires assessing students in all areas related to the known disabilities, simultaneously considering ability to access the general curriculum, considering how the disability affects the student’s learning, forming goals and objectives that correspond to the needs of the student, and choosing a placement in the “[least restrictive environment](#)” possible for the student.
- An ILP is mandated to be regularly maintained and updated up to the point of high school graduation, or prior to the 22nd birthday as long as a student qualifies for special education.

What is a Strength-Based ILP?: Free appropriate strength-based personalized learning plans

Current ILPs are response to a Special Education student’s ability to perform normal and basic academic tasks as required by the state standards to move through grade levels, or pass courses and be graduated. Since State standards apply to all students, some students get extra help and/or services to help make up for what they lack when compared to the standards.

“The purpose of a strength-based ILP is not to normalize them (students), but actualize them.” ~ Merry Juerling

Note that this effort to “normalize” Special Education students based on their needs as compared to the standard is a deficit model of the student: what she/he can’t do and so “needs” support to do to keep up with a “normal child.” Any identification or respect for the student’s “strengths” is done with the intent to make the standardization (keeping up) process even easier and not as something to be

recognized and developed in their own right for the sheer purpose actualizing the student's inherent potential. Finding and developing a student's uniqueness dissolves and renders non-existing, dysfunction-al, inappropriate, and useless any standards except the student's "personal best."

"The interrelated and largely synonymous concepts of average, typical, normal, and the ubiquitous 'ordinary' must be looked at with a critical eye that share the aim of claiming value in human diversity over standardization."

~ S. Baglieri, L. Bejoian, A. Broderick, D. Connor & J. Valle from "Disability Studies Unravels the Myth of the Normal Child"

As is required, high stakes standardized tests (ISTEP+) are the benchmark for all students and so for special education students. As far as public education goes, these tests set the benchmark for what is "normal" academically.

A strength-based ILP not only recognizes and develops what the student needs/lacks in order to keep up i.e., pass ISTEP+, but would also recognize and develop the student's strengths and potential self-actualization.

Customized Actualization Plan

In all cases the ILP must be tailored to the individual student's needs *and potential* as identified by the ILP evaluation process, and must especially help teachers and related service providers (such as para-professional educators) *to not only* understand the student's disability and how the disability affects the learning process, *but what the students strengths are so that teachers and service providers can help actualize the child's interests, passions, and uniqueness beyond curriculum requirements concerning subject matter.*

"The right of all children to learn and become productive citizens compels each employee of IPS to contribute to an environment conducive to learning and instruction through the appropriate methodologies so that all children will develop life skills and become self-actualized individuals."

~ "IPS Instructional Mission" found during the 2005 fall semester on a wall in the hallway just outside the main office at Northwest High School

What is Self-actualization?

"The final aim is not to know, but to be. There never was a more risky motto than: Know thyself. You've got to know yourself as far as possible, but not for the sake of knowing. You've got to know yourself so that you can at least be yourself. 'Be yourself' is the last motto." ~ John Edwards "*What We Steal from Children*" quoted from D. H. Lawrence

According to Abraham Maslow, self-actualization is a need human beings have just as they do for food, shelter, belongingness, and recognition.

- The intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately, of what the organism is.
- Our desire for self-fulfillment, namely, the tendency to become actualized in what we are potentially.
- The desire to become more and more of what one uniquely is.

THE STRENGTH-BASED INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PLAN

Purpose

The purpose of this Strength-Based Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) document is to determine the next free and appropriate learning choices and goals for a student based on a student's interests, uniqueness, strengths, needs and wants towards a future happy, engaged, productive and well-balanced citizen.

As no one student learns at exactly the same rate/speed or in the same way as another student, the Plan of Individualized Learning Choices investigates where the student is currently and where he/she needs development in a reasonably and realistic manner. Instead of focusing on deficits implied by unethical one test high-stakes standardized testing that have been proven to be biased racially, economically and for special needs students and falsely labeling children, teachers and schools as "failing," focusing on deficits implied by social and/or political trends or focusing on implied deficits via standardization of academics achievements, the Village of a student and the student his/herself will spend more time working on interests, strengths and realistic developmental needs of the student.

Process

Who are Villagers?

Village members of a student include the student him/herself, student's parents or guardian, child care providers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings, other relatives, past and current teachers, mentor, religious leaders/mentors/teachers, social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, or any other person who is involved with the student on a daily, weekly and/or monthly basis (Villagers).

Agreed Upon Development/Belief Models

To understand the impacts on a student's learning, Villagers must also understand the student's background. To understand a student's background, input from the student's "village" must be obtained. A student's background is greatly influenced by their parent or guardian's religious, social, political, economical, cultural and other backgrounds; however, as a student ages, the student may find other backgrounds in which they assimilate better because we all are individual human beings with different life experiences, have free will and therefore our beliefs may change from that of our parents. Varied backgrounds can have great effect, positively and negatively, on a student's learning and need to be considered in order to establish realistic and obtainable individualized learning choices for a student through establishing Agreed Upon Development/Belief Models in the areas of Academic, Psychological, Social/Emotional, Cultural, Religious, Political, Economical, Race, and Family. Villagers give input on the Agreed Upon Development/Belief Models using the INPUT Gathering Form in addition to the individual student's unique interests, strengths and needs. The Villagers must define the Developmental/Beliefs Models at the initial Choice Meeting in which they will agree upon which model(s) will be used by the Villagers to assist with determination if individualized goals are met or not.

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Agreed upon Developmental/Belief Model(s) may be reviewed and/or changed during any Individualized Learning Plan (ILP) meeting.

INPUT

For the INPUT section, the goal is to gather input about the student's interests, strengths and development needs from the Villagers of the student for discussion at the ILP meeting. The Villagers are the student's subject matter experts and who know the student best, unlike a one time standardized test. Villagers are invited to participate in assisting the student towards self-actualization of their individual strengths by completing an INPUT Gathering Form and participating in an ILP meeting. The INPUT Gathering Form assists a student in acknowledging and defining their individual interests, strengths and needs that will be discussed at an ILP meeting and used to develop individualized goals for the student.

Participation

Minimally, the student, their parent or guardian and their General Education Teacher must complete a INPUT Gathering Form and participate in the ILP meeting with the student's Teacher of Record (TOR); however, the parent may complete the student's INPUT Gathering Form with the student should the student's maturity and/or ability level not be sufficient to do so. Additionally, should the parent/guardian refuse to participate, the student and General Education Teacher will complete their INPUT Gathering Form and the student's INPUT Gathering form with the student, then the TOR, General Education Teacher and student will conduct a ILP meeting. The General Education Teacher may complete the students INPUT Gathering Form with the student should the student's maturity and/or ability level not be sufficient to do so.

At ILP Meetings and again, the goal is to determine the next free and appropriate learning choices and goals for a student based on a student's interests, strengths, needs and wants towards a future happy, engaged, productive and well-balanced citizen by using the Village member's input via compilation by the TOR/parent, completing the ILP form and using the Goal Form to develop S.M.A.R.T. goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Track-able goals) based on the discussion at the ILP meeting

Before ILP Meetings

Forty-five (45) days prior to agreed upon ILP meeting date and time, Teacher of Record (TOR) will review the student's ILP Goal Progress form with the student and any person responsible for recording and providing documentation towards a student's goals. A parent may volunteer to assist the TOR in the responsibility of compiling the ILP Goal Progress information.

As soon as ILP Goal Progress form is completed and not later than thirty (30) days before an ILP meeting, the TOR will distribute the completed ILP Goal Progress form with blank INPUT Gathering

forms to the villagers minimally to those on the past ILP and any other Villager who has worked with the student during the last year. If it is the first ILP, then the TOR will minimally distribute the INPUT Gathering form to the student, parent, the past Special Needs teacher and the past general education teachers of the student (with English and Math as the defaulting academic areas). The parent may forward to village members of the student inside or outside of the school setting with an invitation to participate. Distribution of the ILP Goal Progress form and INPUT Gathering forms optimally should be distributed with a due that must give ample time for Villagers to complete the form and return it to the TOR, but no less than 10 days to complete and return. The TOR will compile information from the INPUT Gathering forms and distributed to all Villagers at least 10 days before and ILP meeting so that all Villagers can review all INPUT prior to the meeting so that everyone is 'on the same page' when sitting down for the ILP meeting. A parent can volunteer to assist and work with the TOR towards compilation of input and distribution.

ILP Meeting

Upon sitting down for an ILP meeting, Villagers will determine the amount of time that all Villagers have to meet, determine a time keeper to let the group know how much time is left and determine a note taker. If no one volunteers to be a note taker, this responsibility is shared between the parent (if participating) and the TOR of which they can share and compare notes after the meeting. It is important to take diligent and accurate notes for ILP meetings so the notes can be referred back to for future ILP meetings and Villagers questions. If all of the ILP form is not completed before the ILP meeting time has expired, the Village should determine when they will meet again. If some of the Villagers do not have their availability with them, the TOR will be responsible in communicating and organizing a mutually agreed upon date and time to meet again.

The following is the order in which ILP meetings must be conducted:

1. Determine time keeper and note taker.
2. Review prior ILP Goal Progress or prior school academic data.
3. Determine (1st meeting) or review Agreed Upon Development/Belief Models.
- 4 Review INPUT Gathering compilation form and determine what information will be put into an individualized goal.
5. Complete remainder of ILP Meeting form.
6. Create individualized S.M.A.R.T. goals based on information from discussion of INPUT Gathering.

Outcome

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While it is important for the student to consider the Villager's input concerning what the Villager's see as the student's interests, strengths and development needs towards the student's own self-actualization of their own strengths, it is more important to note that the student has a right to agree, to disagree, maybe agree, maybe disagree and to not have an opinion about any interest, strength and/or developmental need a Villager may have concerning him/herself. The Villagers have a responsibility in guiding the student towards self-actualization within their discussion during an ILP meeting.

The outcome of the ILP meeting is the development of S.M.A.R.T. goals that are individualized to the student. Whenever possible and depending upon the maturity of the student, the student is responsible to track their progress on their goals by compiling documentation of proof of achievement of the goals throughout the year and for calling a reconvening of the ILP meeting should they accomplish all of their goals prior to the next annual ILP meeting or are finding one or more of their goals to be unrealistic or unobtainable. The Village also has these same responsibilities at all times.