

A Systematic Review: College Preparedness and the Role of Special Education Professionals

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Abstract

The purpose of this review is to systematically identify the benefits of the use of Morningstar and colleagues' (2017) proposal of the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Framework and application of the six domains to Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and goals for students with disabilities wishing to transition to post-secondary accommodations. Additionally, this review highlights areas of concern that impact a successful transition to college for students with documented disabilities. Incorporating a more personalized approach to IEPs, goal development and implementation CCR literature can offer a guide for best practices for special education professionals. Ethical considerations are included to highlight the need for a more personalized and comprehensive transition plan for students who indicate post-secondary as a goal in their education plan.

Keywords: students with disabilities, college transition, college and career readiness, special education professionals, individualized education plan

Introduction

The lack of effective preparation for students in high school that are on Individualized Education Plans (IEP) for transition into the college environment has proven to be a challenge for the students and their families, as well as higher education professionals to reasonably accommodate. There are efforts and a need to implement more personalized, realistic goals on IEP/504 plans by the special education professionals in high school to begin required skill development with the student before the pivotal transition into college after graduation (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; More & Barnett, 2014; Whitbread et al., 2007). The process of including preparation for college and employment started to gain traction in the early 2000s with the passage of federal laws and guidelines for students with documented disabilities, with the main focus being on the passage of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, also referred to as Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), where IEP and 504 plans needed to include goals that will promote success after high school completion (Joyce et al., 2018; Lombardi, Izzo et al., 2017; Lombardi, Kern et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018). The problem with the lack of preparation for students with documented disabilities in their transition to post-secondary education would be minimized by the implementation and application of the College and Career Readiness Framework (Lombardi, Kern et al., 2017; Morningstar et al., 2017). Truly individualized education plans for students to increase goals through their secondary education should align with college expectations and reasonable postsecondary accommodations (Monahan et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2017). This systematic review will allow for implications for adaptation into the IEP planning process by special education professionals that both develop IEP/504 Plans and carry out goals and skill development in the classroom (Monahan et al., 2020; Morningstar et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2017). Additionally, including goals and skills regarding technology aids and behavioral management that could lessen the impact the student's disability has on their learning are beneficial to know prior to postsecondary transition (Asselin, 2014; Lombardi, Izzo et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018; More & Barnett, 2014;

Van Eck et al., 2017). In identifying the presenting problem, it is necessary to understand the background and the development of this topic to conduct research and eliminate barriers for students with documented disabilities.

Background

In this systematic review of literature, the lack of individualized goals and skill development for students with documented disabilities and their struggles with college preparedness and transition are of concern (Morningstar et al., 2017). The inclusion of individualized goals for students is imperative, and throughout this review alignment with the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Framework, purposed by Morningstar and peers, identify the effective application of planning for a student's transition to college (2017). The responsibility of goal development and skill implementation required the need to define the role of the special education professionals involved. The purpose of this review is to identify the best practices for IEP professionals to incorporate college preparedness goals into the student's IEP for skill development. Additionally, this review will identify themes for goal implementation; therefore, the research question will be as follows:

Research Question: How do professionals best implement individualized college preparedness goals into a student's IEP?

Theoretical Framework

The CCR Framework, identified and structured for students with disabilities by Morningstar and peers, started in 2015 and expanded into a framework in 2017 (Monahan et al., 2020; Morningstar et al., 2017). This framework is the foundation for creating effective planning strategies that incorporate inclusive skill-building that can be applied to goal setting for students with documented disabilities to transition more successfully into postsecondary education or training, or into employment (Monahan et al., 2018; Monahan et al., 2020; Morningstar et al., 2017). The CCR framework is comprised of six domains that have been identified as necessary for preparing students for transition out of high school into either postsecondary education or employability. The framework has been adapted to incorporate the identified domains into disability planning in both the academic and non-academic setting (Lombardi, Izzo, et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018). The six domains offer the general application of the domain for all students but focus more on where each domain can be applied on an IEP or 504 Plan for students who identify the goal to transition to college.

Academic Engagement

Academic Engagement is comprised of subdomains: content, structures, and engagement (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017). The necessary categorization is related to the skills required for each subdomain. The content is mostly aligned with the general curriculum of the main course subjects in K–12 and structures the student's abilities to link ideas across subjects and social constructs where engagement is more closely related to behaviors, classroom interactions, and communication (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; Morningstar et al., 2017). Amongst the necessary skill development in academic engagement, the most prevalent highlighted skills across research are the necessity for effective and meaningful communication for engagement in academically related situations. This supports the requirement of goal setting related to peer interactions in socially constructed, academically driven instruction, a common and necessary skill development for students with disabilities (Morningstar et al., 2017).

Critical Thinking

Targeted skills, such as the ability to make inferences, analyze, use innovative problem-solving, are incorporated into the domain of Critical Thinking, and are key characteristics for transition into college (Monahan et al., 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017). Students with disabilities (SWD) in higher

education are often not prepared for the level of critical thinking required in college curriculum even though the IEP reflects an attempt to build these skills (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017). Oftentimes the needed skills development is overly accommodated and SWDs do not develop the capability necessary for higher-level thinking and decision making (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018).

Mindsets

The domain of Mindset is imperative in goal setting on IEPs from a social development perspective and encompasses many of the necessary qualities for self-advocacy in the post-secondary environment. The four skills fostered in this domain are the (a) sense of belonging related to the educational community and peers, (b) personal growth in terms of self-efficacy and the ability to set short- and long-term goals, (c) taking ownership of the learning process, and (d) perseverance or grit (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017). Though these skill sets are incorporated throughout curriculum for all levels of students, the prevalence of these skills on IEP/504 plans is a necessity for the transition to adulthood (Morningstar et al., 2017). Fostering the ability to learn from mistakes, taking academic risks in a safe environment, and seeing real connections to work, peers, and the world they live in offer broad spectrum application to daily living (Morningstar et al., 2017).

Learning Strategies

The skills necessary to succeed in an academic setting that can also directly translate to necessary daily living skills are seen together through the concept of Learning Strategies; the process of identifying the required skills of time management, test-taking skills, study strategies, note-taking, group work, and organizational skills (Monahan et al., 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017). These listed skills are not just necessary in the college transition requirements but are often directly associated with the goals on IEP/504 plans, with little skill development throughout the high school IEP process (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017).

Interpersonal Engagement

Another social component of the domains lies in Interpersonal Engagement, or the interactions students have with themselves and others, in both academic and non-academic settings and relationship-building contexts (Monahan et al., 2018; Monahan et al. 2020). Though this is needed skill development for all students in K–12, IEP goals related to interpersonal engagement are contradictory. Goals often eliminate the student's need to work in groups, or do group presentations, but is a goal to foster interpersonal skills and relationships on the plan (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017).

Transition Competencies

Having Transition Competencies is a foundational concept for all students transitioning out of high school, but more so for students who struggle with transitional skills such as understanding cultures and expectations of environments other than the highly accommodated ones, such as a resource room or small group learning (Monahan et al., 2018). Within the breakdown of this domain are the inclusion of college transition and goal development surrounding college culture and the student's responsibility for identifying the barriers of the disability, what the expectations are in the college environment, and the necessary skills required that historically have been accommodated for in the student's academic career (Asselin, 2014; Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017).

Another Foundation Consideration

It is imperative to take into consideration the legal foundation surrounding the development of IEPs and the standards to which school districts and professionals are held regarding federal and state requirements. Considerations of the previously identified IDEA in 2004, though not a theoretical

framework, laid a foundation of expectations and equal rights for students needing academic accommodations. Morningstar et al. (2017) established guidelines for setting expectations of the professionals who create the education plans as a foundation of the framework. The law specifies that goals written into the education plans must pertain to transitioning into adulthood to include employment goal planning, college or training, or independent living skills (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; Whitbread et al., 2007). Simonsen et al. (2010) applied a schoolwide model to deliver required services that addresses incorporating the requirements into a training delivery so that educators of students with disabilities approach the process as interventionists. The research and peer-reviewed content that has assisted in this problem identification, background information, as well as what will be covered in the application of the prevalent themes in a synthesized manner, were systematically searched for and reviewed for application to the transition into college for students with documented disabilities.

Methodology

The process involving this systematic search for relevant literature related to the topic and presenting problem of barriers for students with disabilities transitioning into college started with electronic searches of peer-reviewed academic journals with dates ranging from 2004 to 2021. The identified date range begins with the litigation of IDEA in 2004 and its required application into the K–12 curriculum requirements. Elton B. Stephens Company (EBSCO) and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) were the databases used. Key terms searched were “College and Career Readiness and disabilities,” “Individualized Education Programs/Plans,” “special education professionals,” “special education,” and “college transition and disabilities,” which were all utilized as keywords for inclusion criteria (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overall Search Criteria and Results

Search	Results Total / Used	Terms	Inclusion/Exclusion
EBSCO	1258 / 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College Transition AND disabilities • College Readiness/Preparedness AND IEP/Individualized Education Program/Plan • College and Career Readiness AND disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only content from 2004–present • English Language • Geographic location of United States only • Academic journals only
ERIC	187 / 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEP or Individualized Education Program or Individualized Education Plan Goals AND Special Education Teachers • College Readiness AND Special Education Teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only content from 2004–present • English Language • Geographic location of United States only • Academic journals only
Bibliographic Search of Monahan et al. (2020)	43 / 2	--	--

Note. Bibliographic Search of Monahan et al. (2020) total articles is the total number of references in the review, 2 of which were used for this systematic literature review.

In EBSCO 1,258 hits utilized key terms, with the inclusion and exclusion criteria, ultimately 10 sources were relevant to this topic. Inclusion criteria terms in EBSCO database searches were: “College Transition and disabilities,” “College Readiness/Preparedness AND IEP/Individualized Education Program/Plan,” as well as “College and Career Readiness AND Disabilities.” In ERIC, 187 peer-reviewed article hits were found, and a total of three applied to this topic. Inclusion criteria terms within ERIC searched were: “IEP or Individualized Education Program or Individualized Education Plan Goals AND Special Education Teachers” and “College Readiness AND Special Education Teachers.” Inclusion criteria within EBSCO and ERIC included the United States for alignment with U.S. educational policy, only English Language, and publications from 2004 to present to align with IDEA passing in 2004. The exclusion criteria in both EBSCO and ERIC were eliminating content published before 2004, excluded research outside of the U.S. or not printed in English, eliminating any content that was not a peer-reviewed academic journal. Ending results of each search, on both databases, were finalized by eliminating duplicate articles, then by reading abstracts to confirm that the content was relevant to the topic, and finally by reading the articles in their entirety to ensure they were relevant to the overall application to identifying or offering solutions to the presenting problem, resulting in a total of 13 applicable peer-reviewed academic journals (see Table 1). Key Terms of “College and Career Readiness” paired with “Disabilities” or “Individualized Education Plan/IEP” yielded more research and systematic reviews; whereas terms related to “Special Education” or “Special Education Professionals” and “College Readiness” yielded more practitioner-based content utilizing research as a foundation for an audience of special education professionals. An additional bibliographic search of articles within Monahan et al. (2020) added to content due to the significant alignment of the CCR framework application to recent studies regarding students with documented disabilities transitioning to college. The additional two resources showed success with CCR integration of the domains into IEPs and implications related to college transition. The 15 articles yielded relevant findings in the incorporation of the CCR Framework into special education planning and college transition skills, leading to identifying key themes in the content.

Data Analysis

Strategy in research informs the methods, and techniques used in gathering and analyzing the literature led to interpreting the patterns that elicited major themes (Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2021). Articles were analyzed based on college readiness skills, where some were directly tied to the CCR framework, but many were categorized as transition planning for students with disabilities. Research articles that pertained to career readiness and skills directly out of high school for SWD were excluded, whereas research that incorporated transition planning to career or college were still incorporated. Another area of research where overlap occurred, but was ultimately excluded, pertained to the accommodation process in higher education. The decision to exclude these studies came from the lack of application to the needed skill development prior to transitioning to college and focused more on the perceptions of SWD and experiences establishing accommodations in postsecondary education. Research that pertains to the IEP process and implementation were included due to the direct link of utilizing the student’s goals for post-secondary education and incorporating them into the IEP to promote college preparedness. The patterns in the research were tracked through thematic analysis, first using margin notes which contributed to using coding and categorization that developed into emergent themes (Saldana, 2021).

Emergent Themes

The comprehensive review of the literature identified three overarching themes and powerful concepts related to the college preparedness of students with disabilities and the role of the professionals involved in that process. The IEP and the goal writing on those plans that should be specific to the student is the first key theme to promoting and incorporating the CCR framework

(Lombardi, Kern et al., 2017, More & Barnett, 2014; Morningstar et al., 2017). The next fundamental and necessary inclusion of review is the role that the special education professionals have in the adaptation of the IEP, the CCR framework and requirements, and the necessity of the relationship (Pazey et al., 2016; Pyle & Wexler, 2011; Whitbread et al., 2007). The final theme addresses the overall impact on college preparedness and the issues with transition to college for students with documented disabilities (Joyce et al., 2018; More & Barnett, 2014; Pyle & Wexler, 2011).

IEP Goal Writing

The intention in both the CCR framework, as well as the IDEA legal foundation, is to develop educational plans that cater to the individual student, addressing their specific needs for skill development and how to best develop those skills in an academic and non-academic setting (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; Morningstar et al., 2017). The previously identified six domains of the CCR framework are outlined to help all students. The systematic review of literature and research has shown the application of CCR to the development of IEP/504 plans specifically for SWD and implicating each of the domains in the IEP development and implementation process (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018; Monahan et al., 2020; Morningstar et al., 2017; More & Barnett, 2014). More and Barnett (2014) emphasized the necessity of quality IEP goals that are clearly written to address the required steps and development skills that relate to academic, social and behavioral, and career transition skills. This process should begin at the start of high school education and be reevaluated annually once goals are met to incorporate additional skill-building.

The process of IEP goal development, the writing of the IEP, and the implementation of the skills development process is quite a cumbersome undertaking. While understanding the policy requirements of what is included in an IEP goal, it is important to mention that efforts have been made to streamline the development process, while still meeting mandated requirements under IDEA and incorporating necessary CCR goals (More & Barnett, 2014). A related theme to apply in conjunction with this IEP process is the role of those who develop and implement the identified goals, the special education professionals.

The Special Education Professionals' Role

The responsibility of the IEP goal planning and writing falls on professionals within school districts to collaborate with several parties to best effectively create plans that foster growth and development on an individualized basis for each student (Joyce et al., 2018; More & Barnett, 2014; Pyle & Wexler, 2011; Simonsen et al., 2008; Whitbread et al., 2007). This becomes the professional's responsibility to implement, develop skills and build relationships all while meeting state and federal requirements (Joyce et al., 2018; Monahan et al., 2020; More & Barnett, 2014; Morningstar et al., 2017; Pazey et al., 2016; Simonsen et al., 2008; Whitbread et al., 2007). Whitbread et al.'s (2007) application of models in professional development training highlights the legal components of IEP creation while stressing the professional's responsibility to collaborate with all parties involved to create successful plans for students to successfully transition after graduation. To further elaborate on Whitbread et al. (2007) focus on collaboration and relationship building with all team members, Pazey et al. (2016) emphasized the integration of the whole-child and quality of life principles into planning and curriculum, which overlap with the Morningstar et al. (2017) application of the CCR domains into academic and non-academic goal planning by the special education professionals. Pyle and Wexler's (2011) approach to identifying ways to decrease dropout rates of students with disabilities includes six recommendations for professionals to include in education planning, curriculum, and their individualized approach that also incorporates the whole student and aligns with the CCR framework domains. The recommendations are subcategorized to first considering the diagnostic process of identifying the specific barriers for SWD, or in the CCR framework more closely addressing academic engagement, learning processes, and mindset goals (Lombardi, Kern, et al., 2017; Pyle & Wexler, 2011). Pazey et al. (2016) also fall in line with the second category of targeted interventions

to consider when hoping to decrease dropout rates. In order to do so, there is a need to develop relationships, promote advocacy, and an individualized approach to the student's goals (Lombardi, Kern et al., 2017; Pyle and Wexler, 2011). The CCR framework domains of critical thinking, interpersonal engagement, and transition competencies are more aligned with curriculum-based goal planning and fall along the basis of the third category to prevent dropout through school wide interventions (Morningstar et al., 2017; Pyle & Wexler, 2011). As it is easy to see that the professionals who work to develop and implement IEP/504 plans are inundated with requirements and methods to implement effective goals, all while working to develop and maintain supportive relationships, there are many ways all of this links to the impact on college preparedness. Both the IEP goals, and the special education professionals that create them are necessary for the educational endeavors of SWDs. It is essential to consider the impact of these two themes on the ability to transition to post-secondary education for SWDs.

Impact on College Preparedness

In drawing from the CCR domains, every single category has implications to impact college preparedness for students where needed skills intended for development are not taught, but rather just a drop-down menu of goals that is generically input for every student that qualifies for an IEP or 504 plan (More & Barnett, 2014). The implications of inadequate goal planning, lack of individualized skill progress, and overcompensated goals that never address the needed skill development, such as behavior or learning auxiliary aids, all lead to a negative impact on the student's level of preparedness for the expectations in higher education (Asselin, 2014; Connor, 2012; White et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2009). The needed information related to these two impactful categories on college preparedness is that behavior is not something accommodated in most post-secondary environments, whereas development of needed skills by utilizing auxiliary aids is a reasonable accommodation request that can be made in college but not often explored in-depth in K–12 (Asselin, 2014; Connor, 2012).

Behaviors

A significant difference between IEPs and higher education academic accommodations is that most colleges do not accommodate for behaviors (Connor, 2012; Van Eck et al., 2017; White et al., 2017). The impact on students with behavioral concerns or symptomology is accommodated largely for their behaviors in K–12. There is little intervention of skill development in emotional and distress tolerance, and students are expected to completely eliminate these behaviors in the short transitional period before starting college (Van Eck et al., 2017; White et al., 2017). In the CCR framework, the domain of Academic Engagement largely addresses the necessity for effective and meaningful communications and behaviors in academic situations, and the requirement of goal setting relates to peer interactions in a positive social manner connected to the academic environment (Morningstar et al., 2017). The CCR domains of Interpersonal Engagement and Transition Competencies also incorporate these necessary communication and relationship building skills. The counterproductive nature of some IEP goals eliminates the need to participate or complete tasks that assist in regulating behaviors and in working with peers, which impacts the transition to college, as these skills are required but not accommodated (Lombardi, Kern et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018; Morningstar et al., 2017).

Assistive Technology

Understanding the impact of the disability and providing training on assistive auxiliary aids before college allows the student to bridge the gap and can significantly impact the student's success once their college career begins (Asselin, 2014; Connor, 2012). The Learning Strategies domain of CCR that encompasses necessary skills that assistive technology can support is combined to include time management, test-taking skills, study strategies, note-taking, group work, and organizational skills (Morningstar et al., 2017; Monahan et al., 2018). Asselin (2014) identified a key component that

familiarity with assistive technology can have a positive impact on the transition to college, since this transitional shift in responsibility is made to the student. Students need to understand the barriers their disability presents to their learning and explore a means to bridge the gap that used to be filled with IEP goals.

Ethical Implications

The transition to college from high school is a stressor for most students regardless of their academic or social adaptation ability. SWDs are left to move on to a different learning environment with skills that were minimally taught and no knowledge of the differences in accommodation application (Monahan et al., 2018; Monahan et al., 2020; Morningstar et al., 2017). Related ethical considerations are the differences in the accommodation process and required documentation for services. Students transitioning into college are required to submit recent and age-appropriate documentation for disability justification, and in K–12, it is the school district’s responsibility to provide testing at the expense of the district (Connor, 2012; White et al., 2017). Oftentimes testing happens once at a young age, and the team simply renews established goals, leaving students and their families to assume the cost for psycho-social educational testing to receive accommodations in college (Connor, 2012; Van Eck et al., 2016; White et al., 2017). The lack of inclusion of auxiliary aids in IEP goals and identifying what software is better able to manage and encompass the requirements of college expectations is an additional financial consideration to weigh when addressing the ethical utilization of state-issued funds (Asselin, 2014; Lombardi, Izzo et al., 2017; More & Barnett, 2014).

Additional ethical concerns are the requirements and added responsibilities of the special education professionals that are expected to develop, implement, teach, mentor, and build relationships with students and families (Connor, 2012; Simonsen et al., 2010). In addition, they are still carrying out duties assigned under state and federal laws, leading to the need to restructure job requirements and service delivery to provide the needed support to students (Connor, 2012; Simonsen et al., 2010). The utilization of the software that is intended to speed up the IEP writing process has increased the usage of goal banks that are not individualized for the specific student nor cater to the needed areas of skill development, with minimal tracking (More & Barnett, 2014).

Discussion

It is evident from this review of literature that there are barriers in place for students on IEPs or 504 Plans in high school who struggle with the transition into postsecondary education. The ability to utilize CCR as a framework for IEP/504 Plan goal development promotes both a structured plan for special education professionals to follow and a skill development plan for students and their families to understand what is transferable to college and what will not be considered a reasonable accommodation.

Limitations

The present review of literature is limited in several ways, some of which are linked to the inclusion and exclusion criteria that were employed for identifying the literature. For example, excluding literature that did not specifically identify the United States education system potentially eliminated diverse perspectives of implementing college preparedness goals that are not rooted in the U.S. legal considerations. Additionally, another limitation is that IEP goal planning and implementation is a school district responsibility handed down by the state, and does not follow the same structured approach for every IEP or 504 Plan written in the U.S. The reviewed literature also did not incorporate research of the perspectives of the professionals who are responsible for implementing the IEP goals and developing the skills. Finally, the review of literature was not specifically geared toward one state in the U.S., recognizing that college and career readiness processes are handed down from the state education departments and vary in the application of which frameworks are utilized

(Monahan et al., 2020). In retrospect, utilizing identical search terms in databases may have yielded different results.

Recommendations

As evidenced by the implementation of Morningstar and colleagues' application of the CCR framework in 2017, there is a need to address this application longitudinally. The recognition of applying CCR to a specific population, like students with disabilities, offers the opportunity for future research to identify effective and reliable application to create truly individualized education plans and implement best practices in the skill building process as a standard. With further research into incorporating these necessary skills into the IEP and its implementation, the data could provide a foundation to influence educational policy regarding SWDs, IEPs and 504 Plans, and special education professionals' professional development.

Conclusion

The purpose of this review of literature was to identify how incorporating the CCR framework to IEP goals promotes college preparedness for SWDs. The studies reviewed recognize the themes to consider for effective IEP planning and how the CCR framework guides the process. It is imperative to continue the ongoing research to apply CCR to the IEP process for professionals and for researchers to expand the knowledge and promote successful transitions into postsecondary education.

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