Physical Disabilities: Education and Related Services, 2014, 33(1), 17-38.
doi: 10.14434/pders.v33i1.4855

ISSN: 2372-451X
http://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/pders/index

Article

ANOTHER TOOL IN THE BELT: SELF-DIRECTED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR TEACHERS OF STUDENTS WITH MODERATE AND SEVERE DISABILIITES

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Abstract: Chronic shortages, high attrition rates, the unique demands of the job, and geographic isolation from colleagues have been identified as unique challenges within the profession for teachers of students with moderate and severe disabilities. Many different forms of professional development exist for educators; however, these experiences do not always adequately meet the specific needs of individual teachers. This article presents an additional tool for professional learning utilizing a framework for selecting, monitoring and assessing progress toward self-identified areas of professional growth. The proposed model considers teacher development in three dimensions including school-based, community-based, and universal growth.

Keywords: *professional development; multiple disabilities; teacher preparation*

Jennifer is a special education teacher for students with moderate and severe disabilities. Jennifer comes to school early and leaves late working to provide what she sees as the best opportunities for her students. Her closest teaching colleague in moderate and severe disabilities is based at a school 10 miles away. More and more throughout the year, Jennifer begins to feel that she is alone in her efforts for her students. The teachers and administrators in her building, while very kind and encouraging, do not seem to fully understand what she does on a daily basis. Her special education administrator is spread so thin with many pressing issues that she is not able to provide much individualized support absent a crisis. Just last week, Jennifer participated in the third all school required professional development session. While the topic was valid for the majority of teachers in her school, it failed to address the specific needs of her population. The last time Jennifer remembers connecting and collaborating with another teacher in her discipline was during student teaching and prior to that during her teacher preparation program at the university. The fact is, Jennifer feels that she is operating alone. There is no program that can schedule her day, no one manual that can appropriately train her paraprofessionals, and no day planner that can effectively manage her multiple collaborations with teachers and therapists in order to meet her students' individual needs. At the end of the first three years, Jennifer considers her options. She can (1) pack up and leave, hoping to find employment in a more supportive work environment, (2) resign herself to the fact that she may never have the time to do more than survive the profession, or (3) decide that she needs to develop a plan of action to support her professional learning, despite how daunting a task this seems.

Introduction

Jennifer's problem is not uncommon for teachers of students with moderate and severe disabilities (MSD). While these teachers typically work in general education schools side by side with general education teachers, therapists, and teachers of special content areas (e.g., art, physical education), teachers of students with MSD often experience unique issues and challenges. These frequently include geographic isolation from colleagues in their field (Lang & Fox, 2003; Ludlow, Conner, & Schechter, 2005), a lack of sufficient professional support (Ayres, Meyer, Erevelles, & Park-Lee, 1994; McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008), and difficulty accessing necessary materials and information for the job (Rude et al., 2005). Additionally, these teachers often struggle in bridging research to practice through implementing research-based practices with fidelity (e.g., Greenway, McCollow, Hudson, Peck, & Davis, 2013; Snell, 2003). These issues and others faced by teachers of students with MSD can pose significant challenges to an already complex job. Additionally, such struggles can lead to challenges in the development of self-efficacy for these teachers. Self-efficacy, the belief in one's abilities to be successful, has been identified as critical to teacher effectiveness and professional competence (Greenwood, Olejnik, & Parkay, 1990; Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011) as well as an important factor in predicting student achievement (Anderson, Greene, & Loewen, 1988). In a review of research pertaining to what keeps special education teachers in the field, Billingsley (2004) identified access to relevant professional development as one of the key components to increase teacher support and retention.

Professional Development and Learning

Professional development has been described by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT, 2008) as "a continuous process of individual and collective examination of practice. It should empower individual educators and communities of educators to make complex decisions; identify and solve problems; and connect theory, practice, and student outcomes" (p. 9). An equal emphasis is evident in both the individual areas of improved practice for the teacher as well as the collective opportunities to share and develop professional skills and characteristics in unison. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2009) defines professional development in three distinct segments. The first describes professional development as a deliberate process of improvement in knowledge and skills of special education teachers. Second, professional development includes active participation in self, peer, and program evaluation for continuous improvement. Finally, special education leaders are charged with promoting a climate of professional development among their colleagues.

In both the AFT (2008) and CEC (2009) descriptions, professional development is portrayed as both an individual and collective effort. Teachers are expected to work toward their own improvement as well as to support the growth of their colleagues. The final component of professional development from CEC describes a role tied to administrative responsibilities, but given the many administrative duties of teachers (e.g., supervision of paraprofessionals, management of paperwork), this component could be expanded upon for teacher use as well. Professional development is active and focused on self-improvement as well as supporting and encouraging others to engage in the process. Professional development includes the development of professional judgment skills, that is, knowing what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and what to do next (Coles, 2002; Dottin, 2009). In the current climate of accountability (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010) and mandates for the use of evidence-based practices in the classroom (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001), teachers must continuously work to improve their own professional judgement in order to enhance their decision-making skills (e.g., Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2008).

The process of learning for practicing teachers is complex and entails multiple factors (e.g., prior knowledge, learning content, and context) (Avalos, 2011). Measuring this professional growth and determining why and how it occurs continues to be a challenge within educational research (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). While the terms *professional development* and *professional learning* have been used to identify the same general concept of teacher growth, the authors concur with Opfer and Pedder, in using the term *professional learning* to highlight the multifaceted nature and continual process of growth and development in the profession.

Though there is a desire for and commitment to providing professional development for teachers, traditional professional development has been criticized as being ineffective in providing teachers with sufficient time, activities, and content necessary for increasing teachers' knowledge and fostering meaningful changes in their classroom practice (Loucks-Horsley, Hewson, Love, & Stiles, 1998; Odom, 2008). Typical professional development or learning activities take on many different forms, from workshops (e.g., Courtade, Browder, Spooner, & DiBiase, 2010) to online modules and courses (e.g., Hanline, Hatoum, & Riggie, 2013) to coaching (e.g., Bethune & Wood, 2013). In today's era of educational reform (e.g., increased

emphassis on teacher evaluations; Sledge & Pazey, 2013), professional learning should also include occasions for teachers to reflect critically on their practice and to fashion new knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learners (Avalos, 2011; Prawat, 1992). Self-reflection is a prominent feature of social cognitive theory as it relates to how individuals make sense of their experiences, explore their own cognitions and self-beliefs, engage in self-evaluation, and alter their thinking and behavior accordingly (Pajares, 1997). For this reason, the authors drew on social cognitive theory to develop a professional development model that promotes self-reflection and self-regulation to provide teachers with a framework for individualizing professional learning.

Self-Directed Professional Learning

Professional learning is self-directed when the learner takes the lead role in facilitating her own professional growth. Self-directed professional learning (SDPL) includes such components as planning what is to be learned (Nunan & Lamb, 1996; Slavit, & McDuffie, 2013), practicing the skills in everyday settings, self-monitoring and assessment to track skill development (Nunan & Lamb, 1996), and lifelong learning (Brown, Ferrill, Hinton, & Shek, 2001). In SDPL, teachers provide the momentum and direction of professional learning through their use of self-management, monitoring, and motivation (Garrison, 1997).

While not explicitly a part of the teacher research base in the field of moderate and severe disabilities, SDPL is not a new concept. It has origins in the field of adult learning (see Garrison, 1997) and is evident both within and outside of educational disciplines. In the field of pharmacy, SDPL has been utilized to foster professional socialization of pharmacists (Brown et al., 2001) as well as to encourage a tradition of life-long learning through self-directed reflection, improvement plans, and assessment (Rouse, 2004). Within the nursing profession, due to the personalized nature of SDPL for determining professional growth needs, structured SDPL has been identified as an important addition to traditional professional development (DiMauro, 2000; Williams, 2001). Additionally, SDPL has been encouraged for use within human resource professions in order to create a workplace focus on continual learning and development (Ellinger, 2004).

Within education, SDPL has been identified as a tool to encourage professional growth for teachers in the areas of mathematics (Slavit & McDuffie, 2013), science (Capps, Crawford, & Constas, 2012), elementary education (Wagner, 2011), and to support the integration of educational technology (Kirk, 2012). While not specifically directed toward teachers of students with moderate and severe disabilities, SDPL concepts are also evident in self-determination for students with special education needs through instruction in setting and monitoring student goals toward personal development (e.g., Shogren, Palmer, Wehmeyer, Williams-Diehm, & Little, 2012). Evidence has emerged that, while not always formalized, SDPL is often naturally occurring within the teaching profession (e.g., Avalos, 2011; Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009; Wagner, 2011). Mushayikwa and Lubben described educators as intrinsically motivated to learn. Many teachers engage in classroom research to investigate the effect of their instructional methods. This teacher-led inquiry has been identified as an important tool in professional growth. Additionally, teacher-led inquiry has been found to have a duplicative effect within the school and professional community at large (Zeichner, 2003). In other words, when individual teachers

make intentional efforts to improve upon their practice, colleagues often follow suit. Teachers also naturally tend to seek out advice and collaboration from their peers in an effort to improve their own knowledge and skills (Avalos, 2011; Coggshall, Rasmussen, Colton, Milton, & Jacques, 2012). While much of this development occurs naturally within the profession, Slavit and McDuffie (2013) found that teachers are more likely to initiate and complete activities related to professional learning when provided with an explicit framework for such activities.

SDPL can offer many benefits for the individual teacher as well as the classroom, school community, and beyond. For the individual teacher, SDPL has been found to sustain and enhance learning acquired from typical professional development activities (Mushayikwa & Lubben, 2009). SDPL has also been reported to increase motivation, job satisfaction, and perceived control and confidence of teachers in their professional learning (Beatty, 2000; Slavit & McDuffie, 2013). Additional benefits of SDPL include the potential creation of a collaborative professional learning environment within the school (Coggshall et al., 2012; Zeichner, 2003; Nir & Bogler, 2008). Zeichner, along with Nir and Bogler contend that teacher self-reflection and subsequent development of their professional practice can result in student academic and behavioral improvements. As for an extended effect of SDPL, Slavit and McDuffie describe the potential of teachers to extend beyond their own classroom and school to impact the profession on a larger scale (e.g., influencing state-wide educational policies).

Considering the self-directed emphasis within common professional development definitions (i.e., AFT, CEC), examples within and outside of education, as well as the significant needs in the field, the authors suggest consideration of a self-directed model for professional learning as an additional tool to increase teacher knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy. The model includes a step-wise process to improve professional practice in three distinct areas: (1) the school or classroom—as in personal knowledge and capabilities in the field; (2) the community—as in local actions to improve community inclusion and support for this population of students; and, (3) universal—as participation in the movements of the field as a whole (refer to Figure 1). Systematic self-reflection and action in these three areas is intended to help teachers develop the knowledge and skills necessary to improve their practice (school), develop healthy partnerships to create and maintain opportunities for their students within the community at large (community), and engage in meaningful efforts of professional service promoting beneficial legislation, public policy, and social justice for individuals with disabilities in the U. S. and beyond (universal).

Professionalism in Three Dimensions

School-Based Professionalism

School-based professionalism is professional learning driven by the teacher. School-based professionalism begins with the teacher recognizing an area in need of improvement and deciding to find a means to address this need. This may include a need for increased foundational knowledge (e.g., procedures, policies, historical perspectives), further development of skills (e.g., data collection methods, collaborating with parents, training paraprofessionals), or improvement in specific practices (e.g., implementing social narratives, using visual supports, planning functional behavior assessments). While training programs for teachers of students with

disabilities provide a foundation for knowledge and skills, research points to the need for continued growth and development once teachers are in the field (Brownell et al., 2010).

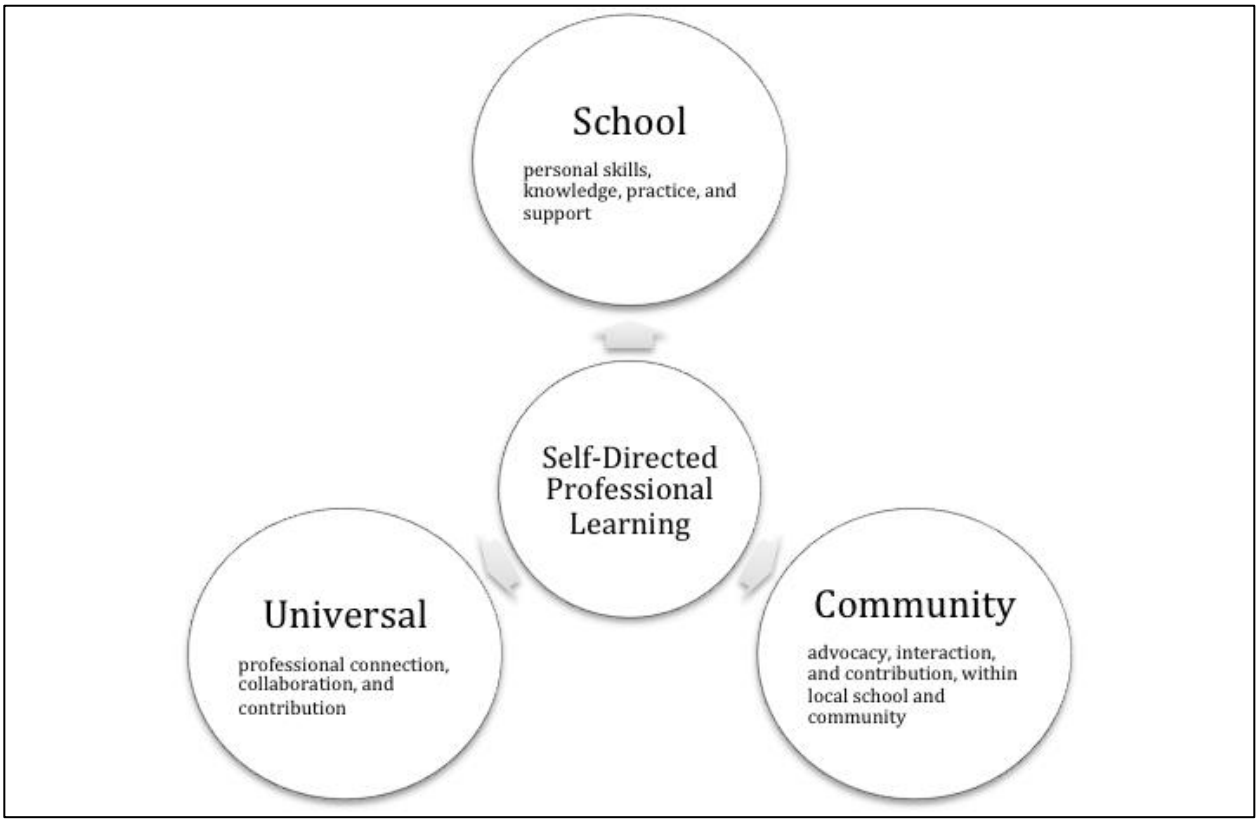

Figure 1. Three dimensional model for self-directed professional learning.

For self-directed efforts in school-based professional learning to be effective, the teacher must determine a few specific areas to focus on and then choose a course of action (as discussed in the following section). The self-directed nature of this dimension of professionalism has been supported in research on the use of self-management strategies to increase teachers' use of evidence-based practices (e.g., Belifore, Fritts, & Herman, 2008; Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007). Once focus areas are chosen, the teacher selects a professional learning activity that would best meet her professional needs and particular context. For example, a teacher focusing on improving implementation of social narratives might locate and engage in an online module on social narratives. Likewise, a teacher focusing on increasing foundational knowledge of special education policies might locate and engage in a web-based seminar (i.e., webinar) on special education policies.

School-based professionalism is intended to increase teachers' personal awareness of skills, practices, and procedures within the field. Research indicates that professional development/learning is correlated with increased teacher retention rates (Reynolds & Wang, 2005). It is also expected that engaging in activities related to school-based professionalism would have the effect of improving instructional practice and the subsequent outcomes for students, which is the ultimate goal of professional learning activities (Odom, 2008).

Community-Based Professionalism

Community-based professionalism refers to the integration of the teacher with families, within the school, and within the local community, as both a professional and an advocate for students with MSD. The school-family-community partnership model has been suggested as a framework for school counselors in increasing local involvement (Bryan & Henry, 2012) and as a means to address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Adym, Bryan, & Duys, 2012). This framework can be extended to teachers who work with students with MSD in an effort to improve opportunities for students. For special educators, involvement with school-family-community partnerships would extend the education and support of students with MSD beyond the special education classroom and encourage involvement at a community-wide level.

Community-based professionalism that increases partnerships with families, schools, and the community may take multiple forms. For example, a special educator may act as an advocate to families by providing information on accessing resources, supporting families as they make decisions, and empowering families to implement practices at home (Murray, Handyside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013). Within schools, teachers may act as a behavioral and/or content adaptation consultant to teachers within their own school. At the local level, educators may build partnerships within the community by presenting information on disabilities to local organizations that want to improve their understanding and capabilities for access (e.g., religious group, library, dental school). Teachers may also engage in advocating locally for the inclusion of students with MSD in community events and organizations.

Community-based professionalism is intended to increase teachers' partnerships with families, the school within which they work, and the local community. Research on collaboration between parents and special educators indicates that collaborative teachers communicate openly and frequently, are committed to developing the partnership, demonstrate equality in decision-making and implementation of services, show competence in skills, and respect each member of the partnership (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). These same characteristics (e.g., communication, commitment) can be used to develop partnerships in the school and in the community. Community-based professionalism may result in increased parent involvement, increased community opportunities for students, increased community understanding, and increased access to services within the community for students with MSD.

Universal Professionalism

Universal professionalism refers to the connection of the teacher to broad efforts related to the field on a national and international level. This connectedness is achieved through engaging in professional learning activities with other professionals in the field. In a field where teachers report feeling isolated (Lang & Fox, 2003; Ludlow et al., 2005), connectedness is essential to retention. Universal professionalism efforts are aimed at the specific issues of educating students with MSD, beyond a teacher's individual classroom or local community. These broad efforts may include recruitment of teachers to the field, national and international advocacy on behalf of individuals with MSD, and participation in professional organizations to promote the causes of the field.

Universal professionalism efforts that teachers may engage in to improve the field on a national and international level might take on many different forms. For example, a teacher may become involved in special education advocacy groups such as CEC, Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, or TASH (formerly The Association for Severe Handicaps) as a means to inform policy (Whitby & Wienke, 2012). At the national level, special education teachers may collaborate with other school professionals (e.g., professional school counselor, university professors) to participate in professional conferences in which they can present information about their practice to a wide venue of professionals including administrators, professors, students, as well as other teachers (Harwell, 2003). Similarly, at the international level, teachers may provide in-service trainings abroad to teachers in countries who need help developing and/or expanding their special education programs for students with MSD (Jones, 1993).

Universal professionalism is intended to increase teachers' ability to improve the field of special education nationally and internationally – moving beyond their classroom or local community. Special educators play an important role in policy advocacy for students with MSD and have an ethical obligation to advocate for policy that supports this population of students (Whitby & Wienke, 2012). Participation in universal professionalism efforts such as professional advocacy are essential to the development of the field of special education and their activities may lead to improved policy and improved national and international student outcomes.

Steps for Self-Directed Professional Learning

This section describes a seven-step process teachers can follow to consider, select, and assess specific elements in each of the three professionalism areas. Included in the process is a strategy familiar to most teachers of students with MSD, which is a systematic, task analytic approach to professional learning. Table 1 provides a simplified description of each step.

Step One: Conduct a Self-Assessment

Figure 2 provides a self-assessment based on best practice in the field as indicated by textbooks typically used for teacher preparation in the field of MSD. This self-assessment is the basis for a SDPL plan. In an effort to achieve professional growth, it is important for teachers to critically consider their current skills and abilities in each of the areas. Prior to the start of the academic year, teachers are encouraged to read through each of the items on the self-assessment and reflect on their personal performance and activity in each area from the previous year. After some consideration, teachers should rate themselves in each of the areas. For additional support and encouragement, a trusted peer can be solicited to give a perspective on the teacher's current performance and skills. Self-assessment such as this has been found to be a beneficial initial step in the professional learning process for teachers (Coggshall et al., 2012)

Next, teachers should look over their ratings in the self-assessment and select one or two topics in each of the three professionalism areas as a focus for the year. The remaining areas of need are not the priority at this point and should be tabled for consideration the following year.

Table 1

Seven-Step Model of Self-Directed Professional Learning

Step	Implementation
1. Conduct a self-assessment	• Figure 2 should be used to guide this process • Skills and abilities should be rated honestly for maximum effectiveness.
2. Evaluate the completed self-assessment	• Self-ratings should be reviewed to determine the most relevant 1-2 topics from each of the three areas (e.g., school-based) to focus on for the year
3. Determine goals and objectives	• Write 2-3 specific short-term and measurable benchmarked objectives for each topic.
4. Secure the support of a trusted colleague	• Find a trustworthy individual (i.e., support person) to establish accountability for the objectives developed. • Share objectives with that individual.
5. Collect data on progress	• Progress toward objectives should be monitored monthly or quarterly by collecting regular data using Figure 3.
6. Monitor growth	• Objectives should be reviewed regularly individually and with a trusted peer. • Any necessary adjustments should be made to enable successful outcomes toward personal improvement objectives
7. Celebrate success	• At the end of the year, objectives and progress should be reviewed and successes celebrated with a trusted peer.

Steps Two and Three: Evaluate Self-Assessment and Determine Objectives

Steps Two and Three involve making plans for addressing the specifically identified professional learning needs. Two or three specific, measurable short-term objectives should be made for each improvement goal. Congruent to the research in developing objectives for students with disabilities, each objective should contain a statement explicitly describing the learner, behavior, condition, and criteria (Alberto & Troutman, 2013). Each objective should be accompanied by additional information including: a projected completion date, necessary resources and materials, and any additional steps needed to achieve these objectives. Figure 3 provides a template to record this information and Figures 4, 5, and 6 provide examples of completed forms.

Some teachers may have a difficult time considering the tasks in steps 1 and 3. Educating students with MSD can be a complex job and deciding what to focus on and where to go for support can be daunting. Helpful resources for best practice and critical topics in MSD include professional organizations, content specific websites, or course textbooks (e.g., Snell & Brown, 2011; Westling, Fox, & Carter, 2015). In some cases reviewing such resources before or after self-assessment could help teachers better understand their areas of strength and challenge, and select purposeful objectives and resources. See Table 2 for a list of web-based resources.

Professional Learning Self-Assessment

Year ____ - ____

Rate your personal effectiveness in each of the categories by checking the level that best fits your current skills and knowledge in the particular area.

H-Highly Effective = high level of understanding and independent performance
E-Effective = medium level of understanding and some independent performance
M-Minimally Effective = lower levels of understanding and minimal independent performance

School-based: *Growth in personal content knowledge & empirically based practices*

H	E	M	Communication/Language	H	E	M	Disability characteristics
H	E	M	Curriculum	H	E	M	Assessment
H	E	M	Behavior	H	E	M	Paraprofessional Supervision
H	E	M	Sensory/ Motor	H	E	M	Cultural Issues
H	E	M	Health and Safety	H	E	M	Data Collection
H	E	M	Functional Life Skills	H	E	M	Systematic Instruction
H	E	M	Assistive Tech/ AAC	H	E	M	Community-Based Instruction
H	E	M	Transition	H	E	M	Program Planning
H	E	M	Collaboration	H	E	M	Working with Families

Community-based: *Advocacy for increased student opportunities, community understanding, access to services*

H	E	M	School Resource	H	E	M	State Resource
H	E	M	School District Resource	H	E	M	Student Advocacy
H	E	M	Parent Resource	H	E	M	Parent Advocacy
H	E	M	Community Resource	H	E	M	

Universal: *Involvement in efforts to advance the field as a whole*

H	E	M	Professional Organization Activity	H	E	M	Collaboration in Research
H	E	M	Knowledge of current issues in the field	H	E	M	Conference Presentation
H	E	M	Legislative Action				

Figure 2. Professional Learning Self-Assessment

Objectives and Support Plan

Support Person: _____ Year [ ] - [ ]

Progress Review Dates: [ ] [ ] [ ] [ ]

Topic	Objective	Resources needed	Target	Progress notes		Completed
		•				
		•				
		•				
		•				

Figure 3. Objectives and Support Plan

Support Person: Jill Durbee **Year** 2013 – 2014

Progress Review Dates: 10/26/13 | 1/18/14 | 3/28/14 | 6/6/14

Topic	Objective	Resources needed	Target	Progress notes		Completed
Assistive Technology	By the end of the 1st semester, I will identify and describe the four components of the SETT assistive technology decision framework.	• SETT Framework website: http://www.jayzabala.com/Documents.html	1/18/14	10/26	Met with Jill- haven't read through SETT components yet	1/18
				1/18	Met with Jill- was able to identify each of the components and give examples for each of my students ☺	
				3/28		
				6/6		
Assistive Technology	By the end of the 2nd semester, I will conduct assistive technology assessments and write a summary report for two of my students .	• AT assessment instructions • AT assessment materials • model AT assessment report	6/6/14	10/26	Identified 2 students who could use an AT assessment	6/6
				1/18	Brainstormed issues in each of the SETT 4 areas	
				3/28	Located and compared AT assessments (WATI, SETT) and picked forms to use	
				6/6	Conducted assessment for Jack and Rosa and wrote report	

Figure 4. Sample School-based Objectives and Support Plan

Support Person: Jill Durbee **Year** 2013 - 2014

Progress Review Dates: 10/26/13 | 1/18/14 | 3/28/14 | 6/6/14

Topic	Objective	Resources needed	Target	Progress notes		Completed
School Resource	By the end of the 1st semester, I will identify two special education related topics that teachers within my school would like to know more about	• survey form with possible topics	1/18/14	10/26	Sent email out to department to get ideas about frequently asked sped questions that teachers ask	1/18
				1/18	Made list of 10 possible topics and emailed survey to whole school to see top topics- most popular were behavior management and autism characteristics	
				3/28		
				6/6		
School Resource	By the end of the 2nd semester, I will present research-based information on the two topics	• ask principal about presenting at spring in-school in-service • web/ book resources on the selected topics	6/6/14	10/26	Asked principal about presenting- he (excitedly) said yes!	6/6
				1/18		
				3/28	Started gathering resources; contacted sped teacher at Mill Middle School to help with presentation	
				6/6	Presented on 4/15 (great feedback and interest in continuing yearly presentations)	

Figure 5. Sample Community-Based Objectives and Support Plan

Support Person: Jill Durbee **Year** 2013 – 2014

Progress Review Dates: 10/26/13 | 1/18/14 | 3/28/14 | 6/6/14

Topic	Objective	Resources needed	Target	Progress notes		Completed
Legislative Advocacy	By the end of the 1st semester, I will send one letter to a state legislator about my support or lack of support of legislation affecting individuals with moderate and severe disabilities	• Get name and contact of my state reps • Find out positions on current issues	1/18/14	10/26	Found name and contact of reps	1/18
				1/18	Wrote email about decrease in funding to local transition programs and likely negative affect on my students	
				3/28	Received a letter back☺ wrote a thank you and follow-up with invitation to share more info on the topic	
				6/6		
Legislative Advocacy	By the end of the 2nd semester, I will send one letter to a federal political representative about my support or lack of support of legislation affecting individuals with moderate and severe disabilities	• CEC Smart brief • Get name and contact of my US reps • Find out positions on current issues	6/6/14	10/26		6/6
				1/18	Subscribed to CEC smart brief	
				3/28	Located contact info for US senator	
				6/6	Wrote email of support for her stance on increasing IDEA funding	

Figure 6. Sample Universal-Based Objectives and Support Plan

Table 2

Web-based Training and Informational Resources

Name	Web Address
DPHMD (The Division for Physical, Health and Multiple Disabilities)	http://community.cec.sped.org/DPHMD/home
DADD (the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities)	http://daddcec.org/Home.aspx
AAIDD (American Association for Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities)	http://aaidd.org/education#.U693-Y1dVTc
TASH (formerly The Association for Severe Handicaps)	http://tash.org/conferences-events/
Center for Parent Information and Resources	http://www.parentcenterhub.org/nichcy-resources/
MAST (Modules Addressing Special Education and Teacher Education)	http://mast.ecu.edu/
The IRIS Center	http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/iris-resource-locator/
Beach Center on Disability	http://www.beachcenter.org/resource_library/default.aspx
YAACK Augmentative and Alternative Communication Connecting Young Kids	http://aac.unl.edu/yaack/toc.html

Step Four: Recruit Support

Once objectives are identified, the next step involves the teacher garnering the support of a trusted peer. The accountability of a support peer has been shown to increase an individual's success in achieving goals (Evenbeck & Kahn, 2001). While teaming up with a fellow teacher in MSD may be the most helpful, any person that is willing and able to provide encouragement, support, and accountability for improvement on goals may serve this purpose. This could include a spouse, friend, colleague, parent, administrator, or even a former classmate. It is essential to select an individual that will provide encouragement during the process and participate in celebration upon successful completion. Coggshall et al. (2012) pointed to peer support as an important factor in professional learning.

Steps Five and Six: Collect Data and Monitor Progress

Throughout the year (e.g., monthly or quarterly) the teacher should regularly review objectives to monitor progress and make any adjustments and additional plans as needed. Depending upon the objectives, progress can be documented using the notes column (see Figure 3) to indicate tasks completed or, perhaps, tally marks to document efforts toward growth. Many objectives may require pre-planning as well as reminders in order to come to fruition. Regular review will help to inspire success. Throughout the year, the teacher should continue to meet with his support peer to discuss progress and strategies for achieving objectives.

Step Seven: Celebrate Success

The end of the school year should bring reason to celebrate. Teachers are encouraged to reunite with their support peer to review and acknowledge success achieved throughout the year. Discussion with the support peer as well as self-reflection may include questions such as: What have you learned? How has your instruction improved? What changes have you noticed over the past year? These and other questions can help the teacher to recognize the progress and growth experienced over the year. Success deserves celebration. Recognizing and celebrating achievements can be a beneficial and inspiring way to end the year-long process of intentional SDPL. A teacher may decide to go out for dinner, take a night off, show off her progress to an administrator or peer, or hang the completed objectives on the fridge.

Final Thoughts

The authors recognize that teachers in the field of MSD are extremely busy and often make personal sacrifices of their time and energy on behalf of their students (Billingsley, 2004). Efforts to increase professionalism, however, should not be thought of as an extra burden, but instead as an essential investment in the future of a teacher's career and profession (Desimone, 2009). It will inevitably lead to more efficiency as one utilizes the experience of others in the field, more fluidity as one's work garners more understanding within the school and community, and more continuity as one taps into the larger context of the field as a whole (Thoonen et al., 2011).

Teacher retention and teacher support are both significant needs within the field of special education (Billingsley, 2004). While there are significant benefits available from traditional modes of professional development (e.g., Courtade et al., 2010), these do not always sufficiently address the needs of teachers of students with MSD (Lang & Fox, 2003). With the many different aspects of the job, it is critical to have a structure for development that involves self-assessment and a plan for improvement (Nir & Bolger, 2008; Thoonen et al., 2011), such as SDPL in order to continue to serve our students and our profession well. While not the end all be all in professional learning for teachers of students with MSD, the SDPL model can work to help teachers to hone in that which is motivating, attainable, and currently pressing within their own classrooms to enhance knowledge, teaching effectiveness, and ultimately student outcomes.

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