

Learning Disabilities Overseas – A Brief Overview

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Although many Americans familiar with special education often fight to maintain the gains we have made in public schools or for additional resources, special education in the United States is still arguably one of the world leaders in this field. The very fact that we have the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), a federal mandate that all children are entitled to a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, is something that most countries around the world do not have.

In many countries, especially in the emerging economies, there are either no or very scarce resources to help children with disabilities. There have been various international degrees and agreements signed to support these children, but there is often nothing tangible to back them up. Though more and more countries are trying to provide services, there remains a shortage of qualified psychologists, special education teachers, and occupational, physical and speech and language therapists. Few schools have any programs to help children with learning differences, nor do many teachers understand how various children learn differently or how to use accommodations or modifications in the classroom effectively.

In the last 25 years that I have spent in international education, I have seen more and more schools trying to meet the needs of exceptional children. Mild to moderate needs might be assisted with a learning center, but as students mature and the material becomes more difficult, these centers are often not enough to meet their increasing needs. Furthermore, those with experience in special education realize that there is no “one size fits all” model for working with students with learning differences. The way that a school might address a student with a language-based learning disability might be completely different from the needs of a child on the autism spectrum or a child with an intellectual disability. Add to the mix a student with complex behavioral, emotional, or psychiatric issues, and the school might be unable to respond effectively.

One trend I have witnessed in recent years is the opening of more private special education centers to help children that have severe challenges. But the heartbreak of these options is that they are designed for very young children, so the child faces the prospect of outgrowing special education resources and having nowhere else to go for their remaining years of school. Furthermore, the centers are never big enough to accommodate the numbers of children needing services.

Therefore, we can expect to see more and more families turning to North America (both the U.S. and Canada) for our unique schools that can help their child. As independent educational consultants (IECs) and school admissions offices, what are some of the things we need to look for when families contact us for assistance?

Quality evaluations

One of the first things any of us ask for is to see any previous psycho-educational testing. When working with international families, many times these students have no testing, or present results of evaluations that were administered by those without proper qualifications. Or perhaps those doing the evaluations will look for different kinds of information, but not the information we can easily use in the school search process. Often these families need to be referred to professionals

back in the United States for a full psycho-educational evaluation by qualified professionals.

Diagnosis

IECs and schools should also be cautious when accepting at face value the diagnosis that parents present in the initial contact. Because the evaluations are sometimes unreliable, one can repeatedly hear the same diagnoses given over and over – especially “ADHD and dyslexia” when in fact, the issues are much more complex.

Intake Questionnaires

Intake questionnaires should be quite detailed, as should be the initial conversations with the parents. Schools and IECs should always be looking for underlying issues that they may not want to discuss, or that might be red flags in the process. Often a request for help to find the right school is really much more complicated than just the “right school.” The IEC, as well as school admissions officers, need to be alert to possible signs of complex emotional or behavioral issues that are really behind the failure to thrive in the present setting.

Cultural Considerations

Another challenge when working with the parents of special needs children is their ability to accept a diagnosis, even here in North America. But when working with families from very different cultures, it is important to be aware of what might be culturally acceptable for them to hear and understand. It is important to be clear when explaining the evaluation or recommendations so that the family remains open to solutions. Often the family needs time to process the information and come to terms with a new way of understanding their child’s needs.

Tutors

Perhaps because there is such a lack of support at the school level for children with learning differences, families often employ tutors to help their children outside of the classroom. This can be very helpful at times, but can also lead to learned helplessness in children. Students need to be taught self-advocacy skills, a work ethic, and a certain degree of independence from an early age. Therefore, some students may arrive in an independent school without these important skills and old habits will need to be relearned.

Parents around the world are the same. They care deeply about their children and want them to have a bright future. Thus, for those who can afford it and understand what rich resources North American schools—especially our outstanding independent schools—can offer, it is no wonder that North American education is so appealing. Furthermore, IECs and schools need to remember that by the time most families find us, they have already reached a certain level of despair before they accept sending their child far from home. Therefore, establishing that relationship and level of trust is essential when working with these families. But in terms of rewarding experiences, as professionals we can be gratified to know that through our knowledge and skills, we have made a profound difference in the life of a child.

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