

SEARCH STRATEGIES

To establish the most inclusionary literature set possible, extensive systematic searches were conducted of relevant electronic databases, hand searches of selected journals, author searches, and searches of selected reference lists, especially of review articles. Two project staff members consulted with a literature search expert from the University of London to design and conduct the electronic searches. The databases that were searched included ERIC (Ovid and Cambridge), PsycINFO (Ovid), and Medline (Ovid). All possible disability, intervention, outcome, setting, and age terms were first identified using database thesauruses.

In addition to the electronic searches described above, a list of ten representative journals was developed based on the recommendations of transition experts (a sample of the most prolific in special education transition, as well as a few representing low incidence disabilities) and a random sample (20% of 520 issues) of these journals were searched by hand by four staff members, beginning with 1990 publications and inclusive of December 2003. These searches yielded 7 articles not already retrieved in the electronic search process; these were added to our database (and only 1 resulted in an article included in a review).

Search Terms

Disability terms included: disabilities, emotionally disturbed, learning disabilities, mental retardation, attention deficit disorder, autism, Deaf, Deaf Blind, physical disability, speech language disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, special education student(s).

Intervention terms included: teaching, learning, special education, best practices, educational programs, community services, classroom discipline, school counseling, dropout prevention, job coaching, supported employment, community based instruction, behavior

management, interagency collaboration, inclusive education, assistive technology, speech therapy, vocational rehabilitation.

Outcome terms included: academic achievement, academic anxiety, education attainment level, achievement, diploma, school graduation, school expulsion, dropout, resiliency, school suspension, school retention, truancy, persistence, employment, employment status, GED, outcomes of education, treatment outcomes, outcomes of treatment, quality of life, recreation, relationships, school to work, transition, school -to -work transition, school transition, work, jobs, employment, independent living.

Setting terms included: schools, residential care facility, accelerated programs, accelerated schools, alternative education, nontraditional education, alternative programs, alternative schools, colleges, community college, correctional institutions, high schools, middle schools, secondary education, higher education, junior high schools, mainstreaming, home school, technical school, vocational school, vocational education, vocational high school.

Sources

To establish the most inclusionary literature set possible¹, extensive systematic searches were conducted of relevant electronic databases, hand searches of selected journals, author searches, and searches of selected reference lists, especially of review articles. Two project staff members consulted with a literature search expert from the University of London to design and conduct the electronic searches. The databases that were searched included ERIC (Ovid and Cambridge), PsycINFO (Ovid), and Medline (Ovid). All possible disability, intervention, outcome, setting, and age terms were first identified using database thesauruses.

¹ The search parameters and procedures described here were utilized to establish the databases for several reviews being conducted by the *What Works in Transition Systematic Review Project*, of which this review represents a single case. Therefore, some of the search terms included here may not be immediately pertinent to “dropout prevention.”

In addition to the electronic searches, a list of ten representative journals was developed based on the recommendations of transition experts (a sample of the most prolific in special education transition, as well as a few representing low incidence disabilities) and a random sample (20% of 520 issues) of these journals were searched by hand by four staff members, beginning with 1990 publications and inclusive of December 2003. These searches yielded 7 articles not already retrieved in the electronic search process; these were added to our database (and only 1 resulted in an article included in the extraction process).

The outcome of all literature searching processes described resulted in approximately 560 studies for which we acquired full-text reports/journal articles and that appeared promising as intervention-based studies in the area of dropout prevention. These 560 studies then were screened for propriety for our meta-analysis interests – that is, that they were intervention based, that they had a measured outcome, that the sample was youth with disabilities, and that the age/grade level of those youth was between 12 and 22 years old and in secondary school environments. The reduction in the number of studies associated with this screening process was from the original 560 studies to 135 studies.

These 135 studies were then subjected to a three-stage coding process whereby a primary coder extracted all the relevant information from those studies for this review; a secondary coder completed a semi-independent coding process similar to that used by the primary coder; and a consensus process was used to settle differences in codes assigned by the primary and secondary coders. This dual coding process resulted in removal of approximately 75% of the quantitative studies from consideration in this review. By far, the most typical reason for the removal of studies from consideration was lack of sufficient data for calculating an effect size. Other less frequently encountered reasons included inadequate specification of the intervention, inadequate

specification of the outcome measure, lack of clarity on whether the subjects sampled in the study were actually youth with disabilities, and a host of design inadequacies such as an insufficient number of participants, conditions, or settings in single-participant studies, or lack of any assurances of comparability of groups in non-randomized group design studies.

The final set of studies that made up the entire database of dropout prevention studies numbered 50 studies. At this point an inductive process was used by all staff associated with this review wherein the 40 studies were sorted into a total of four common intervention constructs – cognitive-behavioral interventions, counseling interventions, applied behavior analytic interventions, and segregated facility interventions. Sixteen studies measured interventions that conformed to cognitive-behavioral theory and are the subject for this review.

Selection Criteria

Youth with disabilities, ages 12-22 and in secondary school, must have comprised exclusively the sample in these studies, or if they were only part of the sample, there must have been separate data reported for the sub-sample of youth with disabilities such that effect sizes could be calculated for this sub-sample. The only exception to this criterion were *ex post facto* studies whose samples were older than age 22, but whose focus was retrospective estimates of the efficacy of interventions that occurred while the sample was within the 12-22 age range.

Outcomes must have related directly or indirectly to a goal of keeping students in school. Direct measures included, for example, persistence in school, persistence in grade, reduction of dropout rate, etc. Indirect measures included, for example, physical and/or verbal aggression. All studies using some form of disciplined inquiry were eligible for inclusion in this review provided they conformed to the criteria above and met minimum methodological standards for

internal and external validity. These included between groups comparison studies, one group pretest-posttest studies, single participant studies, and qualitative studies.