It's About Me: Student Participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) Development

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Abstract

Current Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting practices are generally designed and implemented primarily by the Special Education teacher. However, it is suspected that the earlier educators can get students engaged and interested in their IEP process prior to the IEP team meeting, the better the long-term outcomes will be. The purpose of this paper is to provide the steps involved in working with students ahead of their meetings and come up with an informative poster for them to share with the IEP meeting participants.

It's About Me: Student Participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) Development

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that all students in the United States, regardless of the severity of disability, receives a free appropriate public education. Part of that mandate is to develop an individualized education program (IEP) for students identified with eligible disabilities that essentially functions as a roadmap for the student's annual education to support educational plans for the future. The IEP is developed by a team including a special education teacher, general education teacher, someone to represent the school system, someone to interpret test results, related service providers, someone with knowledge of the student, the parents, and the student when appropriate but no later than 16 years of age. Infants and toddlers, birth through age 2, with disabilities and their families receive early intervention services under IDEA Part C. Children and youth ages 3 through 21 receive special education and related services under IDEA Part B (IDEA PL 108-466).

In addition, individualizing the education for students with disabilities involves including student strengths, needs and interests. Who better to explain student interest, needs, and strengths than the student themselves?

However, few students attend their IEP meetings. In a survey of 1, 183 parents or legal guardians of students age 5-21 currently receiving special education services from across the United States, parents indicated that approximately one-third of students participated in their last IEP meeting (Sanderson & Goldman, 2022). Similarly Kurth et al. (2019) reviewed 66 IEPs for students age 5 to 18 and found that only 3% of IEP meetings included students.

Students who do attend IEP meetings are not involved during the meeting. Many secondary students that do attend IEP meetings have limited to no participation during the meeting (Martin, Van Dyke, Green, et al., 2006; Sanderson & Goldman, 2022).

Importance of Student Participation. It is important to make student participation in IEP meetings a priority. Student attendance at the IEP increases parental satisfaction (Sanderson & Goldman, 2022). Providing students and their parents a tool to identify and organize information such as student strengths, weaknesses, interest, goals, and preferences, is more effective than simply providing an overview of the IEP meeting and legal rights (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994)

The purpose of this paper is to provide the steps involved in working with the students ahead of their IEP meetings and come up with an informative "About Me" poster for them to share with the IEP meeting participants. This also provides a way in which students with more significant needs could take an active role in the IEP meeting.

Who is Missing from the IEP Team? The student. A teacher does not want to overwhelm students and have unrealistic expectations for their involvement in the IEP process. In many high school IEP meetings students seem intimidated and confused by the process because they have not had meaningful involvement in IEP development. Students who are 16 years old or older are mandated to be providing input and actively participating in the process but are not always comfortable doing so. Involving students earlier in the IEP process would solve this issue. Additionally, it seems like parents often feel like they are just at the IEP meeting to listen and be told what their child's strengths and weaknesses are and what goals have been set for them. Unless parents are familiar with their parental rights and the IEP process, they do not usually appear comfortable offering their thoughts and opinions on goals, transition plans, services, etc.

Cavendish, Connor, and Rediker (2017) focus on the importance of having students and parents involved in transition IEPs. Students should attend the meeting in order to be IDEA compliant, but also have purposeful interaction and input in the IEP process. It is imperative to have both student's and parent's input when working on their IEP. Educators should not speak for a student and their parent about what their particular interests are, plans for after high school, concerns about school, etc. Having students take on a leadership role in the IEP process will not only allow for the student to advocate for themselves and be involved, but also the parents will want to be a part of the process as well. Think of it this way: Most parents support their children who play sports or other extracurricular activities by being involved and participating in the events. If parents know their child has a leadership role and will be engaged and participating in a professional meeting forum, they will likely want to support them and be involved as well.

How Early Should Educators Start? Involving students in elementary and middle grades actually provides opportunities to practice self-determination/advocacy and become familiar with the IEP process (Diegelmann & Test, 2018; Sanderson & Goldman, 2022). Danneker and Bottge (2009) prepared elementary age students to lead and participate in their IEP meetings. Traditionally, educators wait until the student is transition age before we start introducing concepts like self-determination and self- efficacy. It is better to start introducing these concepts at an earlier age so students are better prepared for taking an active role in their transition IEPs when that time comes. Danneker and Bottge (2009) acknowledge that while there were benefits to having elementary age students leading their IEP meetings, there are also some challenges as well. Although the managerial tasks such as completing forms and obtaining signatures was still completed by the special education teacher, student pride and ownership was more evident once the students were taught the process of how to lead and participate in their IEP meeting (Danneker & Bottge, 2009).

How Students can Learn to Participate in IEP Development?

Cavendish, Connor, and Rediker (2017) identified several steps to take in order to prepare students ahead of time for being involved in their IEP meeting. Before the IEP meetings teachers should develop positive relationships with students and their families through frequent communication; use technology to create portfolios including former goals, student assessment data, and, student work samples; and meet with the student prior to the IEP meeting to discuss their thoughts on progress and goals for the next year. During the IEP meeting students should be given opportunities to develop indepence, incorporate parent input in the IEP, and write goals and objectives collaboratively. Subsequently teachers should have an individual meeting with student and follow-up with parents.

Some teachers may use a specialized curriculum to teach students self-determination skills to participate in developing their IEP. For older students, Martin et al. (2006) explored the effects of using the Self- Directed IEP Program Intervention vs. The Teacher Led Program. Researchers were already aware of the lack of student understanding and participation in typical middle school and high school IEP meetings. The data indicated that the majority of conversation came from the special education teacher rather than from the student and their family. The special education teachers and parents were talking more about the student's future plans and interests than the students themselves. The results of this study indicated that the students who were instructed using the Self- Directed IEP Intervention Program were much more engaged in their IEP meetings, and the students reported that they had a more positive experience in the IEP meetings. The group of students that participated in the Teacher Led IEP Meetings did not report these positive experiences.

What Are Student and Parent Perspectives?

Johnson, Serrano, and Veit (2013) provide the reader with some first-hand perspectives of a student and her parent. The student did her first student- led IEP meeting when she was in 8th grade and is now a senior who confidently leads her meetings each year. Her mom goes on to discuss how she still attended her daughter's IEP meetings, but now plays a less significant role because her daughter is at the helm. Another student, Maggie, talks about feeling important and part of the IEP process after being taught how to lead in her IEP meeting. It is interesting that at this school where the student- led IEP process was taught, students learned how to lead and advocate for themselves during a daily advisory period.

How to Create an "About Me" Poster

In a review of research on increasing student involvement in the IEP process, Test et al. (2004) found verbal rehearsal, role-playing, and visual or physical prompts supported student participation.

The About Me posters should increase student and parent participation in the IEP process through teaching students how plan and participate in their IEP meetings. It is important to find a way for students to be involved and be valuable IEP team members including students with significant needs.

Involve parents. Sanderson and Goldman (2022) found that a close parent-teacher partnership positively correlated to student attendance and participation in their IEP meeting. To build parent buy-in and address parental concerns or questions, a letter may be sent to the parents explaining the IEP process, rationale for student involvement, and what to expect during the IEP meeting (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001).

Gather materials and planning. For building About Me posters, eductors can use several different materials and forms. First, gather poster board, markers, crayons, stickers, glue, post it notes, images, etc. for the students to use in decorating their poster. Creating an About Me poster serves as a visual prompt for topics that the student should discuss during an IEP meeting. When elememtary aged students led an IEP and did not use a visual organizer, several students forgot annual goals that they were to discuss with the IEP team (Danneker & Bottge, 2009).

Organizing the poster to include steps for student-led IEPs could be incorporated to function as a visual prompt of items to discuss, similar to a self-monitoring checklist used by Diegelmann and Test (2018). Steps may include reviewing the poster content during the meeting (see below), review former goals and student progress, and suggestions for new or revised goals (Cavendish, Connor, & Rediker, 2017).

For students with complex support needs, providing opportunities to use various modes of representation (e.g., video, audio, images) and text may increase the accessibility to IEP development. Multimodal digital books (Krishnan, 2021) or digital presentations could be used to adapt the About Me poster to meet the physical, communication, and/or visual needs of students to participate in IEP development and meetings.

Add Student Characteristics. Encourage students to provide information about themselves, like their age, what grade they were going to be in, favorite subject, interests, etc. In addition, VanReusen and Bos (1994) suggest the parent and student complete inventory sheets at home to identify opinions of the student's strengths, weaknesses, and learning preferences. If students are not able to provide that information, educators can write the information down on separate pieces of colored paper, and then arrange them on the poster how the student wanted. Students could also use previous or current draft copies of the students' IEPs to gather more detailed information about their individual strengths, interests, and preferences, if they are provided instruction on basic elements of an IEP (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001).

Add Student Data. Whatever math and reading skills the teacher described in their IEP as being strengths, should be demonstrated on the poster board. For example, a written-out math problems that they would solve on their poster, or call out spelling words and they would list those on their posters. Students can then discuss what their goals would be for the next year and future jobs needs or desires. For teachers with transition age students, they should include student's various interest interviews, career inventories, etc. in order to allow them to participate in advocating for things that they are interested in. As students age their posters should become more sophisticated in design and presentation.

Practicing Presentations. After each student is done with their poster, they should be explicitly instructed on how to use the poster as a visual organizer to present, co-present, or lead during IEP meeting (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001; VanReusen & Bos, 1994). Keep in mind, it is acceptable to hold up their poster and point to different parts on it as the teacher talks about it, while others might be able to share all of the work, they had on their poster with the IEP team. After sharing their posters with the IEP team, ideally students would remain in the meeting. However, students can choose to go back to the classroom rather than sitting in the remainder of the IEP meeting.

To practice presenting their information, students could share their poster with their classmates or during student-led parent-teacher conferences for practice. Additional social behaviors, such as greetings, introductions, responding to a question, etc., may be beneficial to practice prior to the meeting as well (Hawbaker, 2007).

Conclusion

The goal of the About Me poster is to increase student participation in their IEP development and in doing so also increase parents' contribution in the IEP meeting process. It is important to facilitate student involvement in their IEP development regardless of the method. Student-led IEP meetings improve the student's self-determination, ability to self-advocate, and give them more confidence in expressing their strengths, needs, and interests. By having the students take an active role in their IEP process, parents also will become more engaged, feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions, and be more satisfied with the IEP. The About Me poster is one low-tech method to increase student's active participation in their IEP.

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