IEP Use by General and Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

The role of general and special educators in implementing the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is critical. This study investigated the perceptions of those teachers on when they read the IEP, how they measure attainment of IEP goals and objectives, and the IEPs usefulness in instructional planning. Four hundred twenty-six teachers from suburban school districts in central New Jersey were respondents. Results indicated that the majority of general and special education teachers are reading their students' IEPs in a fairly timely manner and that they find them moderately useful in planning instruction. Results also suggested that teachers relied heavily on grades to document attainment of IEP goals and that teachers felt that the IEPs themselves could be improved if they were shorter with student-specific, critical information that was more relevant to classroom instruction.

Introduction

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) has been called the heart of providing a free appropriate public education. As the cornerstone of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, no document is more significant for ensuring effective and compliant program design, implementation, monitoring, and enforcement of the law. The IEP serves as a roadmap for special education (SE) services (Conroy, Yell, & Katsiyannis, 2008; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Gartin & Murdick, 2005).

The role of general education (GE) teachers is somewhat new to IEP implementation. Since the first federal act addressing the education for students with disabilities, P.L. 94-142, SE teachers have played a critical role in the implementation of this document. However, with the latest re-authorization, responsibility for developing and implementing the IEP shifts to the GE classroom (Lee-Tarver, 2006). This recent re-authorization emphasizes the accountability of both GE and SE, holding schools to a higher level of responsibility for developing and implementing valid and beneficial IEPs than in the past (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001). This shift results in new responsibilities for both GE and SE teachers with regard to the development and implementation of the IEP (Cook & Schirmer, 2003; Huefner, 2000).

To better understand the impact of this shift, it is first important to understand the dual functions of the IEP. Smith (1990) described the IEP as a process and product (document) designed to carry into implementation the law's intent of an appropriate education. However, Smith found the dialogue about the function and effects of IEPs in SE to be meager. As a process, the IEP requires collaboration between parents, teachers, administrators, and the multi-disciplinary team. As a document, Lee-Tarver (2006) describes the IEP as the roadmap for teachers and parents.

Earliest research focused largely on the IEP as a process. Smith (1990) described the research as focusing on concerns regarding increased workload, excessive paperwork, insufficient support, and lack of adequate training (Dudley-Marling, 1985; McGarry & Finan, 1982). Smith also identified several studies that focused on the IEP as a product, examining SE teachers' perception of the IEP's effectiveness on children's learning. For example, Morgan and Rhode (1983) reported that special educators were of the opinion that they could teach, and that children would learn, effectively without IEPs; and Dudley-Marling (1985) concluded that teachers found the IEP unhelpful in planning instruction. Similarly, Joseph, Lindgren, Creamer, and Lane (1983) reported that teachers did not feel that time spent in preparing IEPs was worth the effort.

More current research has focused largely on the IEP as a process with special emphasis on promoting student participation and self-determination at IEP meetings (Arndt,

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Konrad, & Test, 2006; Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010; Branding, Bates, & Miner, 2008; Van Dycke, Martin, & Lovett, 2006).

Unfortunately, very little recent research has been conducted on the IEP as a product. Smith (1990) for example, states that as a field, we have spent scarce time and effort understanding the design of IEPs and how they operate. As McKellar (1991) stated, to reach the ideal of a dynamic IEP for each student with a disability, adults other than support personnel and administrators must be relied on to implement the majority of IEP objectives; therefore, only when IEPs are implemented do they impact the students for whom they are written.

Problems With IEP Implementation

School districts are responsible for ensuring that teachers are informed of their responsibilities to review and implement the IEP (NICHCY, 2010). However, past research has identified a number of problems with IEP implementation. Dudley-Marling (1985), for example, conducted one of the earliest studies to determine if IEPs made qualitative differences in the education of children with disabilities. He surveyed 150 teachers of emotionally disturbed and learning-disabled students. He found that the majority of the teachers in the study felt that the IEPs did not provide assistance in planning day-to-day instruction. The majority also responded that they did not refer to the IEP document very often. Over two thirds (68%) of the sample reported that IEPs were locked away in a central location and were not readily accessible. Dudley-Marling stated that the IEP cannot qualitatively affect the education of students with disabilities unless it guides the delivery of services on a daily basis.

More recently, Giangreco, Dennis, Edelman, and Chigee (1994) conducted a review of the IEPs written for 46 deaf–blind students, exploring whether IEPs helped the receiving teacher and other team members understand the students' strengths and needs. The authors also examined the IEPs to determine if they offered teachers real direction with regard to curriculum and instructional planning in GE settings. IEPs were found to be broad, inconsistent, and inadequately referenced to a GE environment. In addition, the IEPs were found to focus on goals for staff rather than those for students and the goals were provided specific to each discipline. It was reported that it is not surprising that "many IEPs languish in file folders, rarely seeing the light of day" and posit that if IEPs were more relevant—shorter, more focused and individually meaningful—they would be judged to be more useful by teachers.

The only recent research on the IEP as a product was conducted by Lee-Tarver (2006), who investigated the perceptions of GE teachers with regard to the usefulness of IEPs in inclusive classrooms. Lee-Tarver surveyed 123 GE teachers from Alabama and Georgia on their perceptions of the utility of the IEP. Her findings were more positive with regard to

Table 1. Survey Respondents by School and General and Special Education.

	Elementary school	Middle school	High school	Total
General education	81	82	145	311
Special education	45	31	39	115
All teachers	126	113	184	426

IEP use than those of Dudley-Marling's (1985) earlier study, with 65% of teachers surveyed agreeing with the statement, "I use IEP goals and objectives to plan instructional activities" and 63% of those surveyed agreeing with the statement, "The IEP helps me to organize and structure my teaching better." However, these overall positive findings still mean that over one third of the teachers surveyed did not use the IEP for instructional planning purposes.

Given that the effectiveness of the IEP lies in the manner in which it is developed, perceived, and carried out (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979) and that a paucity of studies regarding teacher perceptions of the IEP exist, this study sought to expand that knowledge base by continuing and expanding the work of Lee-Tarver by examining SE and GE teachers' perceptions of the IEP as a product. The focus of this study was to examine whether GE and SE teachers read their students' IEPs, how early in the school year they read the IEPs, how often they refer back to the documents, and if/how they record information from those IEPs for reference in day-to-day planning. Finally, teachers were asked for their perceptions regarding the usefulness of various sections of the IEP for instructional planning and how they would make IEPs more user-friendly.

Method

Respondents

As shown in Table 1, respondents were 426 GE, SE, and related services teachers. Three hundred eleven (73%) of the respondents were GE teachers and 115 (27%) were SE teachers (including related services providers such as speech language specialists). One hundred twenty-six (30%) of respondents taught in elementary schools, 113 (27%) taught in middle schools, and 184 (43%) taught in high schools.

The majority of the respondents (61%) had 8 or more years of teaching experience, 15% had 0 to 3 years' experience, and 22% had 4 to 7 years' experience. Two percent of the respondents did not identify their level of teaching experience (see Table 2).

SE teachers were asked to identify the level of disability of the students they teach (multiple responses were possible). Sixty-eight (68%) reported working with students with mild disabilities, 74 (74%) reported working with students with moderate disabilities, and 20 (20%) reported working with students with severe disabilities.

Table 2. Survey Respondents by Experience and General and Special Education.

Teaching experience	0-3 years	4-7 years	8 or more years
General education	47	64	202
Special education	18	31	56
All teachers	65	95	258

Respondents were employed in seven districts in central and northern New Jersey. Populations of the districts surveyed ranged from 800 to 9,203. Four of the districts served students in Grades K-12, 1 district served only elementary-level students, and 1 was a regional high school. The seven districts were comprised of all relatively wealthy, suburban schools. The New Jersey Department of Education (http://www.state.nj.us/education/finance/sf/dfg.shtml) uses District Factor Groupings (DFGs) for each of the 612 school districts in the state to represent an approximate measure of a community's relative socioeconomic status. The seven districts in this study were all designated as I or J districts on a scale of A (*lowest SES*) to J (*highest SES*).

Instrument

A questionnaire was used to obtain data. The questionnaire consisted of demographic information and 13 questions concerning the use and usefulness of the IEP for instructional planning. Item response format varied by question and included five questions with multiple-choice options provided, one fill in the blank (for month of IEP receipt each year), two yes/no questions (for inclusion of student grade level in reading and math), three Likert-scale questions (on helpfulness of portions of IEP in lesson planning), one forced rating scale question (sequencing importance/usefulness of sections of IEP), and one open-ended question (seeking recommendations for improving IEPs).

Procedure

Surveys were given to a sample of teachers within the chosen school districts. Volunteers at each school managed the distribution and collection of surveys. Surveys were distributed in one of two ways: Surveys were distributed at a faculty meeting where they were completed and immediately returned (yielding a nearly 100% return rate) for attendees at the meeting or the surveys were sent to all teaching faculty members within the school with a request to complete and return the information. The return rate on those requests is not available. Surveys were completed over a 2-month period in the fall of the 2008-2009 school year.

Results

The first two questions focused on when teachers received copies of the IEP and how quickly after that date did they

Table 3. Percent of Respondents by Teacher Type for Initial Reading of IEPs.

	General education[a]	Special education[b]
Within days of getting the IEP or notification	60%	68%
	185	79
After a week or two so that I can get to know the pupil first	23%	31%
	72	32
After a month or more	0%	1%
	0	1
I do not read the IEPs	6%	1%
	20	1

Note. Question 2.
[a]Total general education = 310.
[b]Total special education = 116.

read them. The vast majority (94%) indicated that they received the IEPs by the beginning of September (273 of 283 responses), with 5% stating they received the IEPs after that date. Twelve (4%) stated that they received the IEPs in October while the other three (1%) reported receiving the IEPs in "late September."

Table 3 shows that sixty percent of the GE teachers and 68% of the SE teachers read the IEPs within days of receipt or access. Twenty three percent of the GE teachers and 31% of the SE teachers read the IEP "after a week or two so I can get to know the pupils first." One SE teacher indicated that she waited a month or more before reading the IEP. Six percent of the GE teachers and 1% of the SE teachers (one teacher) chose the option, "I don't read the IEP."

Questions three through five focused on the teacher's note-taking on the contents of the IEP and review of those notes or the IEP itself. The third question asked teachers to choose one or more of three options they might use to summarize or save information while reading the IEPs. Thirty-eight percent of the GE teachers and 57% of the SE teachers responding indicated that they "usually take notes." Thirty one percent of the GE teachers and 50% of the SE teachers indicated that they "use a format to summarize the information for ease of review." Twenty percent of the GE teachers and 35% of the SE teachers indicated that they "mark up the IEPs themselves" (see Table 4).

When asked how frequently they refer back to the IEPs after the initial reading. Six options were provided from "once a week or more" to "not at all." The most common response of GE teachers was "less than once a month" (36%) and the most common response of SE teachers (40%) was "once a month." Six percent of GE teachers and 3% of SE teachers indicated that they did not refer back to the IEP until the annual review. Six percent of GE teachers and 1% of SE teachers replied that they did not refer back to the IEP at all (see Table 5).

Table 4. Percent of Respondents by Teacher Type Using Review Techniques[a].

Review technique	Usually take notes	Mark up IEPs	Use format to summarize
General education[b]	38%	20%	31%
	118	61	96
Special education[c]	57%	35%	50%
	66	41	58

Note. Question 3.
[a]Multiple choices possible.
[b]Total general education = 310.
[c]Total special education = 116.

Table 5. Percent of Respondents by Teacher Type Review of IEPs After Initial Reading.

	General education[a]	Special education[b]
Once a week or more	6%	22%
	20	26
Once a month or more	21%	40%
	66	46
Less than once a month but at least once a semester	36%	29%
	112	34
Less than once a semester but at least once more in the school year	12%	3%
	38	3
Not until annual review	6%	3%
	19	4
Not at all	6%	1%
	18	1

Note. Question 4.
[a]Total general education = 310.
[b]Total special education = 116.

Table 6. Percent of Respondents by Teacher Type Review of Notes on the IEP.

	General education[a]	Special education[b]
Once a week or more	10%	34%
	30	40
Once a month or more	28%	37%
	87	43
Less than once a month but at least once a semester	23%	18%
	73	21
Less than once a semester but at least once more in the school year	12%	2%
	36	2
Not until annual review	4%	1%
	14	1
Not at all	3%	0%
	11	0
Do not take notes	12%	3%
	38	4

Note. Question 5.
[a]Total general education = 310.
[b]Total special education = 116.

On the fifth question, teachers were asked how frequently they referred to their notes on the IEP (as opposed to reading the document itself). Table 6 shows that both GE and SE teachers chose the option "once a month or more" most frequently (GE 28%, SE 37%). The second most frequent choices varied however, with 23% of the GE teacher choosing "less than once a month but at least once a semester" (23%), while SE teachers chose the option of "once a week or more" (34%).

Questions 6 through 11 examined the teacher perceptions of the general usefulness of various portions of the IEP. On question six, teachers were asked to rank the importance of four parts of the IEP (goals and objectives, program statement, the present levels of academic achievement, and the modification and accommodations) from 1 to 4. Based on results of the total population (both GE and SE teachers), the modifications and accommodations statements were most highly rated with an overall average of 1.03. The goals and

objectives received the next highest rating with an average of 2.01. The present levels of academic achievement and functional performance followed with an average rating of 2.31 and the program statement was the lowest rated with an overall average of 3.33.

For questions seven through nine, the total population of teachers was asked to rate statements regarding the usefulness of different parts of the IEP in planning their lessons. Using a scale of 1 (*excellent*) to 5 (*poor*), teachers were first asked how helpful the goals in the IEP were in planning lessons. The average response was 3.01. They were then asked how helpful the objectives in the IEP were in planning lessons. The average response was 2.94. Finally, they were asked how helpful the Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance section of the IEP is in planning lessons. The average response was 2.75.

The remainder of the questions in this section asked if typically the IEPs included the student's grade level for reading and/or math. Of 348 responses for the question regarding reading grade levels, 206 (59%) answered "yes" and 142 (41%) answered "no." Of the 271 responses for the question regarding math grade levels, 151 (54%) answered "yes" and 126 (45%) answered "no."

Question 12 asked how teachers determined whether their students had met their goals. Three closed options and one open-ended option were provided. The largest number, 261 (61%), chose "use class grades." One hundred ninety-nine (47%) chose "conduct any informal assessments" (criterion reference, curriculum-based assessments, etc.) and 126 (30%) chose "conduct any standardized assessments."

The final question asked what recommendations the teachers would make to improve the IEP document. One hundred twenty-nine teachers (30% of total) chose to write a response to this open-ended question. Responses focused on two broad areas: the need to simplify IEPs and the need to be specific in IEPs. Comments are analyzed further in the discussion section that follows.

Discussion

With greater efforts being made to place students, inclusively, into GE classes, the task of implementing and updating the IEP now frequently falls to both GE and SE teachers. The results of this study provide further documentation regarding the use of the IEP by these teachers with results focusing in four areas: access to the IEP, perceived usefulness of the IEP, methods used to determine if IEP goals have been met, and teacher recommendations to improve the IEP.

Access to IEP

Obviously, to implement the IEP, the first two steps are to have access to and to read the document. Earlier research, however, suggested that IEPs were not accessible and were often not even read by teachers (Dudley-Marling, 1985).

Positively, results of this study found that the vast majority (94%) of teachers in both GE and SE reported receiving their IEPs in a timely manner (i.e., at the beginning of September). Approximately two thirds of the respondents read the IEP within days of receipt/access, with note-taking or marking of the IEPs a common practice. Clearly, teachers in this study had excellent access to IEPs and were reading them at the beginning of the school year.

While these results are more encouraging than the findings of earlier studies, access to the IEP in early September and reading within a week still means that many students enter the classroom with teachers who have not yet consulted their IEPs. This can result in initial errors of lesson planning and delivery that could have long-lasting effects on the students themselves. First-day classroom experiences can often set the tone for the remainder of the school year for the students. Without IEP information, both large and small errors can be made; thus, teachers who have not yet consulted the students' IEPs are arguably not ready to teach those students. So, while congratulations may be in order for the improvement in access to IEPs by teachers, further efforts still should be made to ensure that students' first-day-of-school experiences are being guided by the contents of their obviously.

IEPs may need to be available in the summer months so that teachers can consult them prior to the opening of school. While this may be administratively difficult, it is important for the students as they begin a new school year.

Perceived Usefulness of the IEP

While earlier studies have suggested that teachers found IEPs to be either unhelpful or ignored in practice (Dudley-Marling, 1985; Lynch & Beare, 1990; Morgan & Rhode, 1983; Nadler & Shore, 1980), current results again were more heartening. Teachers evaluated the usefulness of various portions of the IEP (the goals, objectives, and present levels of academic achievement and functional performance) in lesson planning, and found each to be of moderate usefulness (receiving average ratings of approximately 3 or "good" where 5 was "excellent").

This response is gratifying in that none of the sections were given average ratings below "good" but there is still, obviously, room for improvement. Teachers in both GE and SE should work together to design instructionally relevant goals and objectives and to develop formats for the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance which would more clearly relate to their classroom planning needs. Use of existing IEPs with a group review for suggestions for improvement might also be used, allowing teachers to explore the issue in a collegial manner.

Methods Used to Determine Achievement of IEP Goals

IDEIA 1997 emphasizes the responsibility of GE and SE teachers to accurately measure and report a student's progress toward annual goals. IEP teams must continuously collect meaningful data to document a student's progress toward his or her IEP goals to document the program's efficacy (Vannest, Burke, Payne, Davis, & Soares, 2011).

When asked to identify all methods used to determine attainment of goals, two thirds of all respondents reported using classroom grades to make this decision, slightly less than half indicated using informal assessments and slightly less than one third stated that they used standardized assessments. This finding is consistent with Etscheidt's (2006) findings that while progress monitoring is essential to evaluating the appropriateness of a child's IEP, many IEP teams use inappropriate measures to determine student progress.

Classroom grades are not generally an appropriate standard to determine attainment of goals. Randall and Engelhard (2009) and Guskey and Bailey (2001) for example found teacher grading policies to be guided by neither research findings nor common sense. They also found grading practices to vary greatly among teachers, even in the same school. Such subjective and poorly designed measures cannot provide adequate documentation of progress, in and of themselves.

This issue is of critical importance, in that the documentation of the achievement of the IEP goals and objectives is the means by which the schools demonstrate provision of a free, appropriate public education. Teachers should be trained in alternative measures of progress such as curriculum-based

measurement, rubric-based measures, authentic measures of progress, (including portfolios) or goal attainment scaling, as alternatives to grades for determination of progress (Etscheidt, 2006; Guskey & Jung, 2009; Yell, Katsiyannis, Ryan, Mcduffie, &Mattocks, 2008, Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006).

Teachers' Recommendations to Improve the IEP

When teachers were given the opportunity to tell how they would like to see IEPs improved through an open-ended question, two broad issues emerged: (1) the need to simplify the IEP and (2) the need to increase specificity and clarity. Results suggest that teachers would prefer a much shorter document which contained truly individualized information relevant to their classrooms and the student's needs.

The largest number of comments was in regard to simplifying the IEP. Forty seven comments (34% of all comments made) addressed this issue. Many of these comments simply stated, "Make the IEP shorter." Teachers asked for more concise IEPs and more user-friendly IEPs. Teachers referred to the IEP as "cumbersome" and difficult in which to locate information. As one teacher stated, "Make them shorter. Bullet the accommodations do not bury them on page 40 of 100." Of the 52 high school teachers who answered this question, 7 (13%) suggested that teachers be given a one-page summary of modifications for each student. In general, teachers appeared to find the IEP unnecessarily lengthy and complex. As one teacher put it, "The difference between the length of the IEP and the amount of relevant information is tremendous. I think they would be more effective and accessed more regularly if there was a more concise format." This issue is not a new one. Giangreco et al. (1994) conducted a qualitative analysis of IEPs with similar results. At the time, respondents stated that IEPs were too long to be used efficiently and echoed the sentiments of several of the teachers in this study by calling IEPs "cumbersome." Giangreco suggested the establishment of a Program at a Glance that summarizes the critical concerns for each student in a one-to-two-page document for easier teacher use, explaining that with more inclusion, the IEP no longer serves as a curriculum for the student and thus could be shorter and more meaningful.

Catone and Brady (2005) analyzed IEPs of 54 high school students and commented on the shallowness of IEP content at all levels. Likewise, teachers in their study provided feedback on the content of the IEPs and found the contents to be sweeping and non-specific. The second broad issue their study identified was the need for greater specificity/clarity in the IEP. Several respondents described the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance and the goals and objectives as "cookie cutter," "canned," and "not individualized." They asked for goals that were better defined and objectives that were specific and measurable. One teacher asked for grade-level functioning information, while another asked for more information regarding the student's specific disability. Several teachers asked for more information in the IEP in their specific subject areas. These subjects included physical education, health, world cultures, electives, and the related services. In general, comments seemed aimed at what one teacher described as wanting to know "what a student specifically needs to be successful in my class." Overall, the teachers' comments suggested that the Giangreco et al.'s (1994) findings of IEPs containing "functional rhetoric without substance" appear to continue to be an issue for the respondents in this study.

Limitations

The first limitation to this study was that the sample was one of convenience. Surveys were distributed and collected at various schools and while some were collected at faculty meetings, where near 100% response was guaranteed. Others were simply distributed and collected without knowledge of the response rate. The overall response size of over 400, however, was large and fairly evenly distributed across the grade levels.

The second limitation of this study is that the responses were all from teachers in the central New Jersey area. The responding schools were all well-funded, suburban schools where best practices are the clear day-to-day goal. As such, responses might be considered to be best case responses rather than actual statewide or national practice.

Summary

Given that the implementation and monitoring of the IEP is one of the most critical components in assuring the delivery of SE services, it is incumbent on every school to ensure that both GE and SE teachers are reading, following, and reviewing student IEPs in a meaningful manner.

Results of this survey indicate positively that GE and SE teachers are reading their students' IEPs in a fairly timely manner. Nonetheless, 6% of the GE and 1% of the SE respondents in this study still reported that they did not ever read IEPs. Schools must make clear to their staff members that such behavior will not be tolerated and systems should be put into place to document at least that every teacher has signed to indicate that he or she has reviewed the IEP. Teachers should also be informed of the potential for a finding of legal personal liability for failing to implement the IEP (Wrightslaw, 2008).

Also positively, most teachers reported that they find the IEPs "moderately useful" in planning instruction. Schools seeking to improve their IEPs beyond a moderately useful level should explore which specific types of goals and objectives teachers find most useful and which they deem less useful in educational planning and instructional delivery. Including teachers in such a dialog at the local level could help IEP teams improve IEP perception immediately.

Results also found that significant work needs to be done in helping teachers document attainment of IEP goals. Teacher reliance on grades is not sufficient. Teachers would benefit from further training in the use of multiple assessment models beginning with the use of formative and summative models and then including the specific techniques of direct measurement (e.g., observation), authentic measurement (e.g., work samples, portfolios), and the use of rubrics, for example, to improve the basis on which IEP decisions are being made.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, approximately 30% of the teachers in this survey wrote of their desire to have either simplified IEPs or IEPs that are more specific to the student in question. Further exploration into the most effective format and an examination of how to truly individualize the information contained within the IEP are supported. While the components of the IEP are largely mandated by law and regulation, layout and organization of the IEP components are not. Schools should consult with the teachers to determine what if any changes in layout or organization could address this concern. For example, might placing information critical to teacher review at the front of the document enhance access? Furthermore, teachers should be consulted with regard to the content of the IEP as to which exact areas they find least specific to the students. Careful editing of the content of the IEP, without deletion of mandated information, should, in fact, increase teacher satisfaction and therefore teacher use of the IEP.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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