



NASET's IEP Components Series

Academic IEP Goal Development and Compliance

By Nasser A. Cortez

University of Southern California

Developing appropriate Individual Education Program (IEP) academic goals can be a daunting task for IEP teams when considering that many special education students perform below grade level. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, student IEPs must be aligned with grade-level standards. A recent study that focused on identifying how teachers were navigating the potentially competing demands of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Language Arts expectations and best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities raised some potential concerns regarding IEP compliance in regards to academic goal development. This issue of **NASET's IEP Component series** will present those findings and provide implications for future practice, and research.

Abstract

Developing appropriate Individual Education Program (IEP) academic goals can be a daunting task for IEP teams when considering that many special education students perform below grade level. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, student IEPs must be aligned with grade-level standards. A recent study that focused on identifying how teachers were navigating the potentially competing demands of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Language Arts expectations and best practices for students with mild to moderate disabilities raised some potential concerns regarding IEP compliance in regards to academic goal development. This article will present those findings and provide implications for future practice, and research.

Introduction

The shift in learning expectations and teaching practices brought on by CCSS undoubtedly impacts student achievement. A study by Gardner and Powell (2013) found increased levels of reading and analysis in language arts instruction (p. 52). There is an emphasis being placed on higher level thinking skills, particularly in language arts. Additionally, teachers are diving “deeper into texts—either written words or images—while coaching students to make their own discoveries” (Gardner & Powell, 2013, p. 52). Instructional practices have evolved and higher-level thinking skills and learner independence are emphasized. Haager and Vaughn (2013a) recognize that, “though the language of this document [CCSS] indicates that the standards apply to *all* students, the burden is on teachers in the classroom to determine when and how to make the standards accessible” (p. 1). Essentially, teachers are tasked with providing access, but with little guidance as to how. These issues are amplified when considering students with learning disabilities. These students typically perform below grade level in core academic areas, and require accommodations along with extra supports to access the core curriculum. Teachers are expected to provide students with learning disabilities access to the core curriculum and align IEP goals to grade level standards.

At the local district level, there is not much emphasis placed on writing IEP goals. Professional developments tend to focus on statewide assessments, instruction, or IEP compliance involving timelines and disagreements with families. Some districts have invested in software (e.g., Goalbook Toolkit), programs that helps generate IEP goals based on identified student needs. With Goalbook Toolkit, teachers select areas of need (e.g., academic, social, emotional, vocational, adaptive skills, etc.) and identify students’ current level of functioning in those areas by selecting from the following options: at grade level, 1-2 years below grade level, 3+ years below grade level. Upon doing so, a list of potential goals appears, some at grade level and some below for teachers to choose from. The study described below issued findings that highlight potential issues of compliance in regards to IEP goal recommendations.

Study Summary

A recent study conducted took a close look at how upper elementary school teachers of students with mild to moderate disabilities were navigating the potentially competing demands of Common Core State Standard (CCSS) expectations and best practices in the areas of reading and writing (Cortez, 2018). The problem of practice that guided the study was that of adequately meeting the needs of upper elementary school students with mild to moderate disabilities in the areas of reading and writing. With CCSS being relatively new, the study looked to identify

teacher perceptions on compatibility between CCSS expectations and best practices for students with learning disabilities, along with challenges, as well as existing opportunities.

Methods: This was a qualitative study and the data collection methods were interviews and observations of special education teachers. The study took place in the Bayside Unified School District (pseudonym), a relatively small district composed of 11 schools, including one (Kindergarten through 8th), eight (Kindergarten through 5th), and two (6th-8th). Participants included three special day class teachers and three resource specialist program teachers. Two of the special day classes were grades (4th-5th) and one was grades (3rd-4th). The resource specialist teachers were all (Kindergarten-5th).

Findings: There were some key themes that emerged from this study. For instance, one finding was that teachers' perceived conflict with CCSS grade-level expectations and best practices for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities. More than half of the participants reported feeling that the grade-level CCSS expectations were too challenging for their students to access. See Table 1. Table 1 includes statements made by teachers when asked about tension/conflict between CCSS instructional expectations and best practices. Four out of the six participants reported feeling tension between CCSS and best practices due to the grade level expectations and rigor.

Table 1

Teacher Feelings on Reading Conflict/Tension

Teacher	Teacher responses to the following: In thinking about your reading instruction, to what extent do you feel tension or conflict between CCSS instructional expectations and “best practices” of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities? Or do you feel that these sync up nicely?
RSP 1	“They don’t sync up at all. Umm, like I said, depending on the grade level, but if they’re in primary, they’re usually not reading yet, so we’re teaching them just the basics, like the foundation of reading, so that’s not syncing up to their common core standards in their class. And even the older kids, they’re expecting the kids to be more detailed, they elaborate a lot more and our kids, like upper grade kids, are barely

	understanding what they're reading, so it's hard for them to give more details when they're just trying to learn how to read the text."
RSP 2	"Um, then I feel it's a lot also for them to hit, to hit every um, standard you know, because when they're in gear at RSP I'm really focusing on their goals and you know, what we've decided and try to incorporate what they're doing in class but there's a lot to hit and I like to take little pieces of what they're doing, um, so it is hard to keep up with the "best practices," it's, it's always changing I feel. Just when you really get good in one strategy or something then something new comes around it's like a pendulum"
RSP 3	Not applicable
SDC 1	"Well, no, obviously, our students are 3-4 years behind, they can't do, I mean, we can, we can, we can do informational, we can do opinion, we can do all that, but it's going to be at a lower level."
SDC 2	"I think... sometimes I feel tension when we are expected to grade the... the students at grade level, especially when it comes to the report cards because, yes, you know the... the... standard is way above their... umm... what do you call it like their... ability level, however, we do touch some points... or some standards where it's at the level that they are at. So if their level is at first grade then we try to zone in on those standards at that level. Ummm... but it is hard when it comes to the report cards and we have to grade them based on their actual grade level. Umm... I don't know. That's it..."
SDC 3	"Not for my students, I think they just need so much guidance and so much help with their reading that the Common Core, I don't think is intended for special ed. kids." "I think that goes back to what I just said, um, they don't sync up at all because there is such a disparity between like the independence that the Common Core is expecting and what our students can actually do. Um, the expectations are nice but the Common Core has such higher

	expectation for kiddos, but I think that, um, it's unrealistic for our students with disabilities. I don't think there's any cohesion, you know what I mean..."
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The tension reported has the potential to be problematic. Participants were asked the following question: In thinking about your reading instruction, to what extent do you feel tension or conflict between CCSS instructional expectations and “best practices” of instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities? Or do you feel that these sync up nicely? The responses provided by a majority of the participants indicated that teachers were not teaching to grade-level expectations, but instead, focused on students’ current levels of performance. In addition, some participants emphasized that the expectations of CCSS were too rigorous for their students and not realistically attainable measures (Cortez, 2018, p. 92). For instance, the participant named SDC 3 stated the following: “they don’t sync up at all because there is such a disparity between like the independence that the Common Core is expecting and what our students can actually do,” (Cortez, 2018, p. 92). This is problematic considering that the expectations, based on IDEA, are for students to have access to grade-level standards and instruction. There is a possibility that teachers are not providing this access based on their responses to interview questions in this study.

In addition, all participants reported instructional level teaching as a best practice. See Table 2. Essentially, they viewed teaching students at their instructional level, as opposed to grade level, as a best practice for supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities in reading and writing. Considering that teachers acknowledged that CCSS were too rigorous for their students and not realistic expectations, coupled with teachers identifying teaching instructional level teaching as a best practice, it is not far-fetched to consider the potential for compliance issues. It is likely that many teachers are not aligning their instruction and IEPs with grade-level standards and expectations. While the study supports other findings as well, the two aforementioned themes are significant when considering the expectations for compliance in writing appropriate academic IEP goals.

Table 2

Teacher-Identified Best Practices for Reading

Reading best practices	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Scaffolding	X		X		X	
Align with general education teacher	X	X				
Instructional Level teaching	X	X	X	X	X	X
Visuals	X	X		X	X	X
Sentence frames	X					X
Choices	X					
Read alouds (shared reading)	X	X	X			X
Hands-on	X				X	
Multiple modalities for learning	X				X	
Checking for understanding		X	X	X		

Reading best practices	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Repetition		X	X		X	X
Graphic organizers		X				
Chunking (break it apart)		X	X	X		X
Vocabulary building			X	X		X
Slower pacing			X			
Frontloading			X	X		X
Small group instruction			X		X	X
Strategic grouping			X	X		
Review			X	X	X	
Discussion about texts, learning		X	X			X
Teacher-made assessments				X		
Think time				X		

Reading best practices	RSP 1	RSP 2	RSP 3	SDC 1	SDC 2	SDC 3
Post-It notes (Jotting ideas during reading)				X		
Technology (iPads)					X	
Phonic books (reading)- foundational skills					X	
Positive reinforcement (incentives)					X	
Build student Confidence					X	
Find textual evidence						X
Teacher modeling						X
Pair share						X

Review of Literature

The review of literature is directed by a guidance provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2015) stating that an IEP for “an eligible child with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must be aligned with the State’s academic content standards

for the grade in which the child is enrolled.” The literature recognizes the difficulty in aligning an IEP with grade-level standards and expectations when working with students that are performing below grade level academically. Konrad et.al.,(2014) suggests that “Teachers are expected to make the standards accessible to all students with the expectation that students with disabilities master the CCSS similar to their grade-level peers” (p. 77). In effect, they acknowledge the expectations in providing students with access to grade-level standards and instruction. However, they also recognize the challenge in doing so because “students with disabilities, by definition, on average have skill deficits that place their performance significantly below their grade-level peers” (p. 77). Walsh (2001) poses the question of “how can a special education teacher at the high school level align the IEP of a 9th grade student reading at the 5th grade level with the general education curriculum when reading curriculum for the 5th-8th grades is not accessible to this teacher?” (p. 19). This brings about an interesting point because not only are students with learning disabilities not receiving access to grade-level curriculum and instruction, but in some cases may not be receiving instructional level materials, resources and instruction due to lack of access.

A study conducted by Wehmeyer et. al. (2003) found that students included in the general education classrooms were engaged in tasks aligned with grade-level standards 90% of the time, while Special Day Class (SDC) and Resource Specialist Program (RSP) settings only accounted for 50% participation in grade-level standard aligned activities and tasks (as cited in La Salle et. al., 2013, p. 135). Essentially, self-contained special education programs align instruction to grade-level standards and expectations to a much lesser extent than fully integrated general education settings. Part of the issue appears to be that special education teachers are not provided access to the same materials and/or professional development opportunities as general education teachers. Roach et. al. (2009) conducted a study which found that “special educators reported that they struggled to gain access to comparable curricular tools that were provided to general educators, taught in classrooms segregated from general education classroom and curricula, and that students with disabilities had limited opportunity to interact with peers” (as cited in La Salle, 2013, p. 136). In effect, special education teachers are tasked with aligning their IEPs and academic goals with grade-level standards; however, they lack the resources, including professional development opportunities to do so successfully.

Murphy and Marshall (2015) acknowledge that “Much of the emphasis on preparing teachers in CCSS has, not surprisingly, been directed toward general education teachers” (p. 2). The literature also notes a need for professional development in the area of developing standards-based IEPs. Caruana (2015) states that there is a need for professional development to better understand how to “create, implement and evaluate standards-based IEPs” (p. 243). This demonstrates the need to provide teachers with professional development opportunities that emphasize standards-based IEPs. Furthermore, Caruana (2015), in alignment with much of the

literature, acknowledges that “A standards-based IEP is one that includes annual goals aligned with and chosen to facilitate their attainment of grade-level academic standards” (p. 238).

A key component of developing a standards-based IEP is rooted in the academic goals, which are tied to grade-level content standards, and provide a roadmap by which to help students access the core curriculum. At the local district level, teachers are turning to software, such as Goalbook Toolkit and/or IEP goal banks to find appropriate IEP goals for students. Much of the literature speaks to the use of technology in developing standards-based IEPs and IEP goals. According to More and Barnett (2014) “electronic IEP programs can facilitate the actual writing of IEP goals and objectives;” (p. 103) however, they also acknowledge that “goals developed may be characterized as more standardized than individualized” (p. 104). In essence, the use of technology in developing IEPs may impede on the individualization of these documents. There is a need for teachers to balance the individual needs of students with that of the grade-level standards and expectations. More and Hart (2013) state that, “Many electronic IEP programs contain goal banks generated from or related to the learning standards of the school district. Even though grade-level goals should reflect the general education curriculum, these goals may be above the student’s current functioning level” (p. 27). In effect, they too, recognize that in many cases, student needs do not align perfectly with grade-level expectations. Even so, “present level of performance and the annual goals should be aligned with grade-level standards” (Konrad et. al., 2014, p. 83). Essentially, there are competing demands between IEP expectations based on education policy and the current levels of performance of some special education students. This again, much like in the referenced study, highlights a potential for compliance issues in regards to the development and implementation of academic IEP goals.

Hedin and DeSpain (2018) shed light on an interesting subtopic regarding IEP goal development and implementation. They suggest that only “Some districts require that IEP goals reflect grade-level, Common Core, or state standards with STOs [short-term objectives] specifying behaviors and criteria related to students’ skills” (p. 108). Essentially, not every district is emphasizing the need to align academic IEP goals with grade-level standards. At the local district level, this does not appear to be an area of focus. Many districts are inundated with IEP disagreements and other compliance issues that tend to focus on services and placements, rather than goals.

Discussion

A guidance by the U.S. Department of Education (2015) states that “an individualized education Program (IEP) for an eligible child with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must be aligned with the State’s academic content standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled.” In addition, the guidance adds that “Research has demonstrated that children with disabilities who struggle in reading and mathematics can successfully learn

grade-level content and make significant academic progress when appropriate instruction, services, and supports are provided.” In effect, this affirms that student IEPs are required to be aligned with grade-level standards and additionally that research has demonstrated that students with disabilities can access grade level content and expectations. One critical component to the IEP are the goals developed to support students in accessing the core curriculum. The guidance indicates that IEP academic goals are required to be aligned with grade level standards. The results of the aforementioned study bring about some potential issues of compliance, in particular when considering that teachers viewed conflict with CCSS grade-level expectations and additionally that they view teaching at a students’ instruction level to be a best practice.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of the study combined with the current literature findings and local district initiatives help illuminate implications for policy, practice, theory and future research. For policy, the implications point to a need to clearly define IEP academic goal expectations. In particular, clearly stipulating what is meant by “an eligible child with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must be aligned with the State’s academic content standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled” is key. Does this suggest that goals must be written at a child’s grade level, or do the CCSS allow for appropriate alignment from one grade level to the next? Is it possible to create an academic goal at a lower grade level that through its’ relationship with one or more grade level goals, meets the expectations of appropriate alignment? The significance in this is the potential for compliance issues. Depending on the interpretation of IDEA and academic goal development, it is very possible that teachers are out of compliance in their IEP goal development if they are failing to adequately align student academic IEP goals with grade level standards. There should be a push to revisit IDEA and clarify.

As the literature review suggests, another implication/recommendation for practice is to look into providing professional development on standards-based IEPs for educators. It is critical that teachers understand how to link their IEPs, including the academic goals established for students, with grade level standards and expectations. In doing so, it is providing students with more opportunities to access the core curriculum and in turn, providing a more inclusive education for students with learning disabilities. The concept of inclusion relates to the implications for theory, that is to say that developing appropriate IEPs, aligned to grade level standards is a key component to adequately establishing inclusive learning environments. Mertens (1993) suggests that “*mere* inclusion, for instance, physically including children with disabilities in regular classrooms but otherwise excluding them from meaningful participation, can do little to promote

equality of educational opportunity” (as cited in Howe, 1997). It is important for educators to recognize the connection between their IEP development and inclusive practices. It is not enough to simply place students in general education classroom settings; true access to quality instruction and grade level standards is required.

Lastly, in regards to implications for future research. Research that takes a closer look at IEP academic goal writing for teachers is needed. As this analysis demonstrates, there is a potential for issues of compliance in regards to academic goal writing. An in-depth look into whether teachers are aligning their IEP goals with grade level standards is needed.

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