

IEP Components Series

Barriers to Full Participation in the IEP Process: A Literature Review

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This issue of **NASET's IEP Component series** was written by Olga M. Torguet from Florida International University. Her article focuses on the barriers to full participation in the IEP Process. To advocate for their children and make informed educational decisions, parents must be able to understand the information presented at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 legally mandated that students 14 and older be invited to participate in IEP meetings. As a means to better understand parents' and students' passive participation during these meetings, I analyzed current literature related to barriers that inhibit their full participation in the IEP process. Two studies were identified related to the readability of Procedural Safeguard documents provided by states department of education. Eight published articles were dissected to identify the reasons for the inactive involvement of parents and students. Overall arguments that emerged repeatedly across all articles concerned the inability to advocate due to the high readability level of parents' rights documents, jargon utilized in meetings, and lack of understanding of system procedures and policies.

Abstract

To advocate for their children and make informed educational decisions, parents must be able to understand the information presented at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 legally mandated that students 14 and older be invited to participate in IEP meetings. As a means to better understand parents' and students' passive participation during these meetings, I analyzed current literature related to barriers that inhibit their full participation in the IEP process. Two studies were identified related to the readability of Procedural Safeguard documents provided by states department of education. Eight published articles were dissected to identify the reasons for the inactive involvement of parents and students. Overall arguments that emerged repeatedly across all articles concerned the inability to advocate due to the high readability level of parents' rights documents, jargon utilized in meetings, and lack of understanding of system procedures and policies.

Barriers Impeding Full Participation of Parent and Students in the IEP Process: A Literature Review

Researchers in numerous studies have confirmed the importance of parental involvement in the education of all students (Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Starr & Joy, 2012; Burke 2013). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) mandated that parents of students with disabilities attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. The passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 (Public Law 101-476) recognized family involvement as crucial to developing IEPs. Subsequently, the amendment to IDEA in 1997 (Public Law 105-17) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act in 2004 (Public Law 108-446) further increased parents' roles and enhanced their opportunities for participating in their children's education as a member of the IEP team. Additionally, IDEA in 1997 mandated that students 14 years and older be invited to attend their IEP meetings and that decisions be based on the student's interests and preferences. Although parents and students' involvement is crucial, they both face obstacles at the time of communicating with school personnel and exercising their legal rights in order to obtain the best possible education and services available.

In special education parents and schools are expected to collaborate to guarantee that children with disabilities receive appropriate services. The main way of collaboration is presumed to take place during IEP meetings. "By having significant parental involvement during the IEP process the transition between school and home streamlines and the child is more likely to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)" (Burke, 2013, p.226). Parents are notified of their rights and responsibilities during IEP meetings through a very important document called Procedural Safeguards. These procedural safeguards include the parents' right to participate in all meetings and examine all educational records. In 2006, Fitzgerald and Watkins stated that federal law requires that parents' rights documents contain a detailed explanation of parents' and students' rights related to the evaluation and special education process.

"Existing law and (IDEA) requirements indicate that at all levels of school governance, educational agencies have a legal obligation to communicate procedural safeguards in language understandable to the general public, in print and in other modes of communication" (Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012, p.201). In order to make informed educational decisions, parents must be able to read and comprehend the information that is provided to them by the schools. When parents receive this information, it is anticipated that they understand it, and they will be able to make knowledgeable and suitable decisions regarding their child's education. Likewise, students 14 and older who attend IEP meetings must understand the terminology presented as well as the purpose of the meeting in order to take an active role in the IEP process.

In spite of legal mandates in special education regarding parents and students' IEP participation, current research indicates that the lack of understanding of special education terminology as well as information included in the Procedural Safeguard documents are barriers that impede effective collaboration at IEP meetings. According to Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006), research has demonstrated that parents often do not understand the written information provided to them by the schools. The authors reviewed data provided by the U.S. Department of Education that included statistics about the level of education of U.S. parents and discovered that currently 49% of American adults hold a high school degree or less and the percentage is even lower among parents of children identified as at-risk for special education. Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) affirmed that Parents' Rights documents currently in use are written at levels that are above the reading ability of many parents.

Readability of Procedural Safeguard Documents

Research related to the readability of procedural safeguard documents is very limited. Although more research exists related to parental involvement in special education as well as the factors influencing parents and students' submissive participation during IEP conferences, only a few studies deal with the level of parents' understanding of procedural safeguard documents and IEP terminology. Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) conducted a study that examined the readability of Procedural Safeguard documents from all 50 states in the United States and the District of Columbia. The authors used two formulas to examine samples from each of the documents, the New Dale-Chall formula and the Flesch Grade Level formula. Additionally, they analyzed several qualitative text characteristics such as print size, use of acronyms or abbreviations as well as illustrations, that are believed to influence readability. The New Dale-Chall scores indicated that 20% of Procedural Safeguard documents were written at the college reading level or higher. The Flesch Grade Level scores revealed that more than 50% of the documents were written at the college reading level or higher. Although the results from the readability formulas were not hopeful, the authors indicated that readability formulas are not the only indicators of text difficulty. Organizational features, the number of pages and the use of acronyms may increase or decrease the readability of a document. Therefore, Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) decided to analyze additional characteristics of Procedural Safeguard documents to further investigate the level of readability of all documents. Results of the study revealed that the majority of documents did not include a glossary, a table of content, or any tables or figures. The use of

pictures, illustrations, samples, and examples was minimal. The authors concluded that only a few documents had readability scores that were considered appropriate for most parents and nearly all lacked additional organizational and textual features that would make them more readable.

In a more recent study Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, and Acevedo-Garcia (2012) analyzed the readability of Procedural Safeguard documents using the SMOG readability formula. According to these authors, this formula possesses a high predictive validity compared to other readability formulas commonly used. The readability assessment involved taking three samples of ten sentences, each from different parts of the text, counting the number of polysyllabic words contained within each sample and adding the total number of words across the three sections. Three sections throughout the 51 Procedural Safeguard documents that included parental consent, due process impartial hearings, and discipline were included in the analysis. The results of the study indicated that the mean and median grade level was 16 for the 51 documents assessed using the revised SMOG. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that more than half of state procedural safeguard documents scored in the college reading level range and almost 40% scored in the range considered graduate or professional. "The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) and others which indicate that procedural safeguards documents provided by state departments of education are written at excessively high levels" (Mandic et al., 2012, p. 199). Although the authors found evidence related to the high reading levels of most documents, they stated that their study did not take into consideration factors that promote comprehension such as the support and help provided by parent advocates, presentations, workshops, and parents' rights booklets.

Factors Affecting Parental Involvement in the IEP Process

According to Burke (2013), increased parental involvement leads to the fulfillment of IDEA and better achievement for students with disabilities. Henry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) conducted a three-year seminal study that investigated the participation of African-American parents of 24 preschoolers in special education programs in a large urban school district. The authors included information from previous research that showed a pattern of passive rather than active involvement of minority families in the IEP process as a result of the lack of knowledge of their rights as well as their understanding of system procedures and policies. Therefore, Harry, et al. (1995) decided to investigate further the factors affecting parents' lack of participation in the early years of children's special education placement. They used

interviews and observations to investigate the views of parents of 42 African-American kindergarten children, 18 in general education programs and 24 in special education programs for students with mild disabilities. The results of the study revealed that 16 of 18 parents attended IEP conferences the first year and only 11 of 18 attended in the third year. The reasons behind the decline of participation and nonparticipation in IEP conferences had to do with the emphasis schools placed on documents rather than participation. Harry, et al. (1995) proved that the requirements for compliance entail a tremendous amount of paperwork. Parents who missed a meeting would receive formal documents in the mail requesting their signature. Results of the study indicated that although most parents did not express any concerns about their inability to read the documents, most of them admitted that they did not understand the terminology in the reports. Presently, some of the same patterns are still described in more recent literature. As noted by Burke (2013), parents of students with disabilities experience difficulties navigating the special education system. Burke (2013) discovered that a total of 70% of parents of children with disabilities believe that their children lose services because parents do not know their rights. Burke (2013) also noted that parents feel unwelcome when educators use jargon to describe their children during IEP meetings.

Students' Level of Participation in the IEP Process

Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004) reported that most students who participate in IEP meetings do not exhibit an active role in the process. They conducted a study that included 1,638 participants who attended 393 IEP meetings held over 3 academic years. A two part, 10 item questionnaire provided the data for the study. Questions related to the knowledge about the reasons for attending the meeting as well as understanding what was said at the meetings were included in the questionnaire. Results of the study indicated that students attended 70% of the IEP meetings. Students who attended reported knowing what to do at the meetings and understanding what was said less than any other IEP team member. Therefore, these results do not correlate with the importance IDEA places on students' involvement in the IEP process.

Test, Mason, Hughes, Konrad, Neale, and Wood (2004) reviewed and analyzed sixteen studies related to students' involvement in their IEP process. Approximately 300 students representing varying disabilities participated across the reviewed studies. The purpose of all studies was to increase student participation and analyze barriers obstructing their active involvement in IEP meetings. The authors noticed that students were often unfamiliar with their IEP and were not fully participating in the meetings. Results of the sixteen studies revealed that student participation in the meetings increased when facilitators directed specific questions to the students, avoided jargon and used language and vocabulary that were understandable to the student. Most studies indicated that students were capable of getting involved. However, the primary barrier to greater student involvement was that students were unprepared to represent themselves. Therefore, teaching students skills to enhance their participation prior to IEP meetings had a positive impact on active student involvement in the IEP process. Test et al. (2004) propose that universities and school districts assume responsibilities for ensuring that special educators have the necessary knowledge, skills, and tools to prepare students for their IEP meetings. They suggest that further research investigate whether teacher preparation programs address issues related to students' self-determination and self-advocacy skills as well as teaching students the necessary skills to exercise their rights during IEP meetings.

Ways to Increase Parental Involvement in the IEP Process

Other studies have tested the possibility of increasing parental involvement by using different methods that teach parents to navigate the system and advocate for their children's rights. One of these studies is the one conducted by Burke (2013). The author reaffirmed that the barriers parents of students with disabilities face at the time of advocating for their children are inaccessible procedural safeguards and not knowing how to advocate for their children during IEP meetings. Burke (2013) examined two special education advocacy training models, the Special Education Advocacy Training, (SEAT) and Volunteer

Advocacy Project (VAP). Both projects train individuals in special education policy and advocacy skills. The SEAT trains people with live instructors, whereas VAP utilizes videoconferencing technology to train individuals how to advocate for students with disabilities. The author concluded that these two training models are promising in the field of special education. Parents of children with disabilities require support in navigating the special education process. Although many questions remained unanswered, these models provide an initial effort in guaranteeing that students with disabilities receive adequate educational services. “By preparing advocates to assist parents in both securing FAPE as well as working collaboratively with the school, advocacy trainings offer one way to improve the parent-school relationship” (Burke, 2013, p.233).

Conclusions and Future Study

The literature has indicated that parents need knowledge concerning their rights and responsibilities as parents of students with a disability. However, research shows that parents’ rights documents are too difficult for the average person to read and understand. Furthermore, IDEA requires that students 14 and older be invited to participate in IEP meetings. Given the results of current studies, the readability of procedural safeguard documents as well as the terminology utilized in IEP meetings can hinder students’ participation and ability to self advocate. Since research has shown that parent involvement can have a tremendous impact on a child’s academic success, further research is necessary to determine ways to increase parents’ as well as students’ understanding of IEP terminology, purpose of IEP meetings, and procedural safeguard documents’ information. Parents and students need to understand their rights under the law in order to advocate for themselves and become active participants of the IEP process. “When literacy and language demands exceed people’s skills, access to information, services, and rights is compromised” (Mandic et al., 2012, p.200).

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