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Are Parents Really Partners In Their Child's Education?

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Abstract

Although federal legislation requires parent involvement in the development of Individualized Education Programs, parents often lack adequate background knowledge to partner with school personnel in the development of programs for their child. In an effort to provide all stakeholders with information pertaining to the education of children with disabilities, state departments of education publish documents on policies and procedures concerning special education services. This study examined the readability level of those published documents to determine if they were commensurate with the reading level of most adults. Results of this study indicate that at the surface level, the documents appear to be written at a level of understandability that most adults should comprehend. However, upon further examination, it was revealed that the level of literacy proficiency required to interpret the documents requires a more sophisticated level of literacy. Therefore the documents are not commensurate with the literacy level of most adults.

Are parents really a partner in their child's education?

All parents want their children to succeed. The path to success for most children is through education. Yet, when a child is labeled as having a disability the road to success is complicated and mired with unforeseen details that must be addressed. The issues parents contend with are multiplied. Parents are thrown into a world of special education with rights and responsibilities that they are unfamiliar with and have never experienced. The expectation is that parents are to advocate for their child, know their rights, be knowledgeable about school rules, and educational politics.

Most parents are not aware that they must assume these responsibilities upon initial diagnosis that their child has a unique learning need. The realization that their child has a disability is heavy enough; yet, they are required to be knowledgeable of the legal and educational policies associated with special education. How are parents supposed to educate themselves about the specific intricacies of their child's needs, become a case manager who coordinates specialists, and maintain a job as well as balance their family life. One oasis of hope for parents often is the public schools where public laws such as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2006) were enacted to ensure that all children with disabilities receive free and appropriate services to address the child's unique needs (Lo, 2012). According to Mueller (2009), the letter and the spirit of IDEA are to encourage a partnership between the parents and the school that promotes

an educational team to provide appropriate services for the child. The primary mechanism for achieving this objective is the Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The foundation of the IEP meeting for children with special needs is the concept of the team and the team decisions that are made for the benefit of the child. One of the core principles of IDEA is the belief that parents are collaborative team members in the IEP process. According to Fish (2008), IDEA was created for schools and parents to share equal responsibility ensuring that the child's needs are met. Mueller (2009) states that the principles of IDEA are based upon the working relationship between the child's home and school that fosters an educational team with the goal of providing the child with the agreed upon services. IDEA empowers the parents and school to work together amicably to share a vision of what the child's educational reality should be. Unfortunately, this is often not the reality (Mueller, 2009; CADRE, 2011).

With each reauthorization, IDEA has continued to attempt to strengthen the parents' role in the team meeting. Within the IEP meeting, ideally the child's present levels, goals, objectives, placement, evaluation criteria, and duration of services are determined (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001). According to Cheatham, Hart, Malian, & McDonald (2012), barriers still exist preventing the full implementation of IDEA. Students' successes within the regular classroom are minimized due to limited resources, class sizes, and teacher training. In addition, schools do not provide families with information regarding IDEA or the information is difficult to understand. These issues minimize a parent's ability to truly be a collaborative team member at the IEP table. Parents' struggles to be heard were documented by Zirkel & Gischlar (2008) in their report of 2,800 adjudicated due process hearings nationwide per year. This number only represents the cases that went as far as a hearing. How many other cases are there?

IDEA is based upon the concept of true collaborative teaming. But, what is a team? Is your IEP team truly a team or a group? What is the difference? Collaborative teaming is defined as two or more people working together toward a common goal (Snell & Janney, 2000). In teams, all members have a role in the decision making. Snell and Janney (2000) believe "Collaborative teaming facilitates the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education environments, and can be viewed as the glue that holds inclusive schools together" (p. 33).

While collaboration and teaming is viewed and supported by IDEA as one of the critical roles of special education teachers, historically teacher preparation programs did not always focus on preparing teachers to include parents in the teaming process as noted in Kolstoe's (1970) text:

Both the child and his parents should be told that the child is being transferred into the special class because the class is special.... The entire program should be explained so the parents will understand what lies ahead for the child and so they can support the efforts of the teachers with the child (p. 42).

This attitude, which is still shared by some educators, places educators at the center of decision-making and parents as the recipients of those decisions. Special education was originally based on the scientific belief which is also referred to as the medical model. This scientific belief is that the focus should be on the identification of a disability, which involves in-depth clinical perspectives, with emphasis on the deficit and then taking action to control and/or alter the

disability. Decisions under this philosophy primarily rest on the trained educators; parents are viewed as receivers of their recommendations. Any school failure is then attributed to the parents' lack of support or inability to provide assistance at home (Pushor & Murphy, 2004).

In response to the medical model philosophy, the social model emerged as more inclusive classrooms gained popularity within the field of special education. Instead of focusing on deficits and how to "fix" or "lessen" the disability, the social model focuses on the strengths of the individual and any barriers are the result of social constructivism (Longmore, 2003; Riddell, 2007). That is, how individuals are treated is what makes people different not their unique characteristics. Schools that have embraced the social model typically provide universal supports that are available to all students. These universal supports which often include differentiated instruction, multi-tiered instruction, positive behavior support, and response to intervention are conceptually based on the belief that providing universal assistance will benefit all students and minimize any stigma associated with weaknesses. In addition, schools who subscribe to the social model also embrace full parent participation as they recognize that when parents are involved in their child's school, the child's educational experience is enhanced. These experiences include positive outcomes such as regular attendance, higher academic achievement, positive school behaviors, and higher graduation rates (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Catsambis, 2001; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., & Van Voorhis, F. L., 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; National Middle School Association, 2003; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004; Simon, 2004).

The concept of parent involvement is widely accepted as a strategy to increase students' achievement (Bouffard & Weiss, 2008; Epstein, 2008). However, for students with disabilities, parental involvement is not only considered a strategy but a requirement that is protected under federal legislation. IDEA requires schools to partner with parents in shared decision making that support the academic achievement of students. To this end, IDEA requires parents to be involved in the IEP process from referral to designing academic programs to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities. According to Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak & Shogren (2011) the major principle of IDEA is that "parents have a role and even a responsibility to make decisions about their child's education and that IDEA ... legitimizes parents... as educational decision makers and enables parents, students, and professionals to establish partnerships with each other" (p.124).

Despite the fact that legislation mandates parental involvement in the IEP decision making process and the literature is clear that when parents are involved students' academic achievement increases; in reality parental involvement during the IEP process is limited for some. Fish's (2008) study found that parents of children with autism perceived that they were not treated as equal partners during the IEP process and had to take the initiative to become knowledgeable about special education in order for their children to receive services. Underwood's (2010) study which also examined parental involvement in IEPs found that 62% (N=21) of the parents in their study "were either neutral or not satisfied with their involvement in IEP development" (p. 28). Fish's (2008) study found that 27% of parents disagreed with the academic curriculum determined for their child and 20% of the parents had concerns over their child's placement. However, 45% of the families felt that they were treated fairly and as an equal team member.

Results of these studies suggest that barriers impede parental participation in decision making during the IEP process.

Development of an IEP that represents the collaboration of all stakeholders, including parents, is a complex process which requires a certain level of sophistication. This sophistication includes an understanding of the school culture, curriculum, strategies, legal parameters, and a level of literacy. While school personnel have undergone training on the development of IEPs through their teacher preparation programs and/or staff development, parents are often left to learn the process on their own. In search to learn the process, some parents look to their neighborhood schools, districts, and state departments of education. These public agencies provide documents on policies and procedures pertaining to the education of children in preschool through twelfth grade. Often these documents are developed by state departments of education who are charged with providing support and information to districts, schools, parents and their communities at large. Therefore, these public documents potentially are instrumental to communicating critical information to all stakeholders.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the readability (i.e., the ease in which text can be understood) level of IEPs and handbook/manuals on special education that are developed and published by individual state departments of education, in order to determine if the ease in which these documents can be read and understood is commensurate with the educational level of most adults who may be parents of children with disabilities. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. What is the readability level of sample IEPs and information handbooks/manuals on special education provided by State Departments of Education (SDE) whose purpose is to provide training and education to parents and teachers who serve and advocate for children with disabilities?
2. Are sample IEPs and information handbooks/manuals on special education available on State Departments of Education websites written at a level commensurate with adult literacy?

Method

This study examined fifty state departments of education websites for the purpose of determining if information materials such as sample IEPs and handbooks/manuals on special education are commensurate with the literacy level of adults. Narratives from the sample IEP's present level of academic achievement and functional performance sections; and narratives from the handbooks/ manuals were extrapolated and analyzed using Fry's Readability Index. The Fry Readability Index is a metric developed by Edward Fry to determine the grade reading level of a sample English text. Two national data banks were examined for the purpose of determining the literacy level and educational attainment of adults. The National Center for Education Statistics provided adult readability levels which were compared to the readability level of the sample IEPs and the handbooks/manuals provided by the state departments of education. The U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau provided the educational attainment of adults which

was compared to the readability grade levels of the sample IEPs and handbooks/manuals on special education. Descriptive statistics was used to describe the relationship between the readability of the sample IEPs and handbooks/manuals with adult literacy levels.

Results

Readability Level of IEPs

A review of the fifty SDE revealed that only seven of them provided sample IEPs. Table 1 presents the readability features of the sample IEPs. As the data in the table indicate, the mean grade level for all sample IEPs was 12.85 (1.57). Further word statistics revealed that the mean number of syllables per 100 words for all sample IEPs was 158.14 (10.35). Whereas, the mean percent of three or more syllables in text for all sample IEPs was 15.42% (2.87). In addition, the word statistics revealed that the mean number of sentences per 100 words was 7.09 (2.32); and the mean number of words per sentence was 15.14 (3.80) for all sample IEPs.

Table 1

Readability Levels of Individualized Educational Program (IEP) Documents from Sample State Departments of Education

Readability Features	<u>Sample States</u> (n=7)						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Grade Level	12.0	12.0	15.0	12.0	13.0	15.0	11.0
Mean number of Syllables per 100 Words	150.0	156.0	174.0	153.0	156.0	171.0	147.0
Mean number of Sentences per 100 words	7.8	6.0	5.3	6.9	6.0	5.6	12.0
Mean number of Words per Sentence	13.0	17.0	19.0	14.0	17.0	18.0	8.0
Percent of 3+ Syllables in Text	13%	14%	20%	13%	14%	19%	15%

*Readability features calculated using Fry Readability Index.

Readability Levels of Handbooks/Manuals

A review of the fifty State Departments of Education (SDE) and the District of Columbia revealed that handbooks/manuals on special education were available. Table 2 presents the readability features of the handbooks/manuals developed by the SDE. As noted in the table, the mean grade level of the handbooks/manuals was 13.58 (2.66). However, more than half of the states' handbooks/manuals (62%) were at a 15.0 grade level. Further word statistics revealed that the mean number of syllables per 100 words for all the handbooks/manuals was 175.25 (18.80), and the mean percent of three or more syllables in the text was 20.0% (5.92). In addition, the word statistics revealed that the mean number of sentences per 100 words for all the

handbooks/manuals was 4.80(2.23), while the mean number of words per sentence for the handbooks /manual was 23.86 (8.20).

Table 2

Mean Readability Levels of Training State Handbooks/Manuals

Readability Features	Manuals/Handbooks n=50 Mean (SD)
Grade Level	13.58 (2.66)
Mean number of Syllables per 100 Words	175.25 (18.80)
Mean number of Sentences per 100 words	4.80 (2.23)
Mean number of Words per Sentence	23.86 (8.20)
Percent of 3+ Syllables in Text	20.00 (5.92)

*Readability features calculated using Fry Readability Index.

Adult Literacy

In order to determine if the readability level of the sample IEPs and handbooks/manuals on special education provided by individual state departments of education were commensurate with the adult literacy, two national databases were examined. The first database reviewed was the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The NCES sponsored the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) which is considered to be the most thorough measure of adult literacy. NAAL identified three types of adults’ daily literacy: prose, document, and quantitative. Prose literacy requires individuals to have the skills to comprehend and use continuous texts which are often found in magazines and instructional materials. Document literacy involves the skills to locate and use information which are often required when completing forms such as job application and utilizing charts such transportation schedules. Quantitative literacy necessitates the skills to solve numerical daily activities such as balancing a checkbook, tipping, planning a trip or determining the cost of an order (NAAL, 2012). In 2003, in an effort to determine adult literacy, NAAL conducted a research study involving 19,000 individuals, ages 16 and older in the US. Using a rubric, the participants were interviewed and their daily literacy (prose, documents and quantitative) were rated on four levels of proficiency: below basic, basic, intermediate, and proficient. These levels refer to the complexity of skills required to complete daily literacy. A rating of below basic indicates that the individual has limited skills which require no more than simple or concrete daily literacy. The basic level rating refers to those individuals who have the ability to perform simple and everyday literacy skills. A rating at the intermediate level is designated for those individuals who can perform moderate challenging literacy skills. The rating of the proficient level refers to those individuals who have the knowledge and skills to perform complex and challenging literacy activities (NAAL, 2012). Results of the NAAL study indicate that the majority of participants perform at the intermediate level in the daily literacy of prose (44%) and document (53%). In the literacy

skill of quantitative the majority of the participants were at the basic (33%) and intermediate (33%) level. See Table 3 for a summary of the results of the NAAL 2003 study.

Table 3

Percentage of adults in each prose, document, and quantitative literacy level by percentage

Daily Literacy Type	Below Basic	Basic	Intermediate	Proficient
Prose	14%	29%	44%	13%
Document	12%	22%	53%	13%
Quantitative	22%	33%	33%	13%

Below Basic = no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills; Basic = can perform simple and everyday literacy skills; Intermediate = can perform moderate challenging literacy skills; Proficient = can perform complex and challenging literacy skills.

SOURCE: National Center for Educational Statistics. (2003). *National Assessment of Adult Literacy*.

In order to determine the education achievement of the US population an examination of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau (2011) was completed. A summary of the educational attainment of the US population is summarized in Table 4. As the data in the table indicate, between the years of 2000-2011 the majority 85.52% (1.25) of the US population had a high school or higher degree. Slightly more females 85.89% (1.37) had high school or higher degrees than the male population 85.16% (1.05). Between 2000-2011, 28.13% (1.99) of the population had Bachelor's or Higher Degrees. Slightly more males 29.15% (.84) had bachelors or higher degrees than the female population 26.98% (2.13).

Table 4

Education Level of Individuals Age 25 and over in the United States by percentage

Gender/Age/Year	<u>Education Attainment</u>	
	High School or Higher Degree <i>M % (SD)</i>	Bachelor's or Higher Degree <i>M % (SD)</i>
<u>Females, 25 and over:</u>		
March 2000	84.0 (0.19)	23.6 (0.22)
March 2001	84.2 (0.18)	24.3 (0.22)
March 2002	84.4 (0.13)	25.1 (0.15)
March 2003	85.0 (0.13)	25.7 (0.15)
March 2004	85.4 (0.12)	26.1 (0.15)

March 2005	85.5 (0.15)	26.5 (0.23)
March 2006	85.9 (0.16)	26.9 (0.22)
March 2007	86.4 (0.15)	28.0 (0.23)
March 2008	87.2 (0.17)	28.8 (0.24)
March 2009	87.1 (0.16)	29.1 (0.21)
March 2010	87.6 (0.15)	29.6 (0.21)
March 2011	88.0 (0.15)	30.1 (0.22)
<u>Males, 25 and over:</u>		
March 2000	84.2 (0.19)	27.8 (0.24)
March 2001	84.4 (0.19)	28.0 (0.24)
March 2002	83.8 (0.14)	28.5 (0.17)
March 2003	84.1 (0.13)	28.9 (0.17)
March 2004	84.8 (0.13)	29.4 (0.17)
March 2005	84.9 (0.19)	28.9 (0.29)
March 2006	85.0 (0.20)	29.2 (0.24)
March 2007	85.0 (0.21)	29.5 (0.25)
March 2008	85.9 (0.19)	30.1 (0.25)
March 2009	86.2 (0.19)	30.1 (0.28)
March 2010	86.6 (0.17)	30.3 (0.23)
March 2011	87.1 (0.18)	30.8 (0.23)

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, U.S. Census of Population. (2011). Educational Attainment in the United States.

This study set out to determine if the readability level of IEPs and handbook/manuals on special education, that are developed and published by individual state departments of education, are commensurate with the literacy level of most adults who may be parents of children with disabilities. Results of this study indicate that overall the mean readability level of IEPs provided by state departments of education (n=7) was 12.85 (1.57) and the mean readability level of manuals/handbooks provided by state departments of education (n=5) was 13.58.

A review of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau revealed that the majority of the US population 84% (4.09) had a high school or higher degree (See Table 4). Results of these findings initially suggest that IEPs and handbooks/manuals on special education were written at a grade level commensurate with the majority (84%) of the US population. However, in reviewing the NAAL's study, only 13% of the population had the daily literacy skills of being proficient in understanding documents (See Table 3). Since the IEP forms are documents requiring complex and challenging literacy skills, when considering the results of the NAAL study, this suggests that the majority of the population (87%) do not have the necessary skills to actively participate in the development of the IEP document. In addition, since the handbooks/manuals developed by state departments of education fall under NAAL's daily literacy skill of prose and according to NAAL's study only 57% of the population would have the skills to read and understand handbooks/manuals. In summary, results of this study found that the IEPs and handbooks/manuals developed by state departments of education are not commensurate with the literacy level of the US Population. Results of this study raise two important questions. What is the importance of having a high school diploma if the citizens are

still unable to function at a level of proficiency with daily tasks? What is the census really reporting?

Discussion

Services for students with disabilities in the United States are based on federal legislation known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). One of the core principles of IDEA is the belief that schools and parents share equal responsibility in the design of education plans (i.e., Individualized Education Plans) to meet educational needs of children with disabilities. With each reauthorization, IDEA has continued to strengthen the parents' role in the team meeting. To this end, all State Departments of Education have developed training materials to assist the public's understanding of the special education process.

A limitation of this study, that may adversely impact the broad generalization of the findings, is the number of IEPs that were available from State Departments of Education's websites. It is important to note that only seven State Departments of Education provided sample IEPs which may reveal that not all state departments view this as an important resource. However, even though the sample size of the IEPs was small and does impact the broad generalization, this study did find a disconnect between the readability of IEPs and the general literacy skills of the adult population.

At the surface level, the IEPs appear to be written at a level of understandability that should enable most parents to be active participants in their child's IEP development. However, upon further research the NAAL study reveals that the level of literacy proficiency required to interpret documents is significantly more sophisticated than first believed. A majority of the adult population is not prepared to examine the IEP documents and training manuals without additional support. This study set out to determine if the readability level of IEPs and handbook/manuals on special education, that are developed and published by individual state departments of education, are commensurate with the literacy level of most adults who may be parents of children with disabilities. Results of this study suggest that IEPs and handbook/manuals are not written at the literacy level of most adults. While the US Department of Commerce, Census Bureau revealed that majority of the US population 84% (4.09) had a high school or higher degree (See Table 4) which would appear to be commensurate with the readability level of IEPs (12.85; 1.57) further investigation suggest that having a high school degree does not necessarily mean that the literacy skills required to complete an IEP or to review training documents are the literacy level of most adults. Results of the NAAL's study clearly indicate that only within 13 % of the population possess the daily literacy skills of document (See Table 3). Since the IEP is a document requiring complex literacy skills, this suggests that the majority of the population both those with a high school diploma and beyond do not have the literacy skills necessary to be an equal partner in the development of an IEP. Therefore, most parents are not able to actively advocate for their children without additional training that is commensurate with their literacy level.

These publications require a level of reading proficiency that the majority of the population does not possess. This minimizes a parent's ability to truly be a collaborative team member at the IEP

table. Since parent participation is the cornerstone of shared decision making, it is critical that all communication is accessible to all team members.

The research on the readability level of IEPs in the US provides relevant information to the field of special education as we search for effective communication for all members of the IEP team. Although further research is necessary to gain a better understanding of the complex issues related to the readability of IEPs and literacy proficiency of those involved in the IEP process, to mitigate parents' involvement in the educational process not only denies their right to full participation which is protected under legislation, but sets up barriers for the child's future success.

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