

An Exploratory Study of Successful Paperwork Management Techniques for Novice Special Education Teachers

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Abstract

Eighteen novice special education teachers were interviewed to determine successful strategies regarding paperwork completion and paperwork advice for those new to the field. Interview transcripts revealed five specific paperwork completion strategies: (a) get organized; (b) understand your job description; (c) ask for help; (d) appreciate the value of special education paperwork; and (e) know when to take a break. Each technique is described, enhanced with interview excerpts, and composite examples as appropriate.

The Paperwork Problem

The timely and accurate completion of professional paperwork, such as IEPs, annual goals, objectives, and student re-evaluations represents a distinct challenge for many special education teachers. Excessive paperwork has been reported as a contributing factor in regards to job stress (Emhich, 2001; Olson & Mutusky, 1982), job dissatisfaction (Luckner & Hanks, 2003), and a desire to leave the profession (Cross & Billingsley, 1994; George, George, Gersten, & Groesnick, 2001). These problem may be intensified for professionals in the early stages of their careers, a time described in the research as especially stressful and challenging (Ergenekon, 2009; Mamlin, 2012).

The research clearly establishes professional paperwork as a major *problem* for special education teachers. However, few viable solutions have been proposed. One notable exception has been the Paperwork Reduction Act.

The Paperwork Reduction Act

The Paperwork Reduction Act was created as part of the 2004 revision to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The Paperwork Reduction Act consisted of two components. The first allowed up to 15 states to pilot programs designed to reduce paperwork and administrative tasks placed on teachers and schools. The second section of the act allowed up to 15 states to extend an IEP for up to three years with parental approval.

Although many considered this legislation a step in the right direction, most states were reluctant to participate. Samuels (2006) cited two main reasons why the legislation was not embraced by special education state officials. First, it was believed that a reduction of paperwork was no guarantee of a reduction of liability. It was thought that the only way to defend against possible lawsuits was through extensive documentation.

The second reason why states chose not to participate reflects directly on the nature of bureaucracy. Officials believed that the additional documentation needed to measure the effectiveness of the program would be more burdensome than completing the paperwork in the first place.

The challenges associated with timely and accurate completion of professional paperwork have been exacerbated by a lack of empirical evidence regarding best practices. No peer-reviewed studies were located that specifically recommended routines and practices to improve paperwork productivity. This paper attempts to fill that gap.

The Current Study

An exploratory study was conducted in order to determine (a.) how novice special education teachers managed their paperwork duties, and (b.) what paperwork management advice they would give to those new to the field. A nationwide random pool of fifty novice special education teachers was selected by Market Data Retrieval, a national market research firm that focuses specifically on educators. Novice teachers were defined as those with five or less years of classroom experience. This subgroup was specifically targeted since they are the demographic most often described in the literature as being negatively impacted by professional paperwork.

The pool of fifty was then narrowed down by the researcher to twenty in order to increase participant diversity in variables such as geographic location, age, grades taught, subjects taught, and types of disabilities regularly encountered. Eighteen of the twenty contacted respondents agreed to participate in a semi-structured telephone interview expected to last approximately forty-five minutes.

Key demographics reported among the respondent sample included residency in twelve states, teaching students with nine distinct IDEA-recognized disabilities, and teaching in schools that run the gamut from pre-school to vocational transitions services. Other demographics mirrored those reported elsewhere in the literature, such as a majority of respondents being both white and female. (Billingsley, 2002; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Griffin et al., 2009).

The mean age was 33 years old. This was older than the mean participant in the aforementioned studies, but can be accounted for by the fact that five of the participants were embarking on their second career. The mean number of years teaching experience for the sample was 2.5. A select rundown of key demographics is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Select Respondent Demographic Information

Name	Age	Years Experience	Primary Type of Instruction
Amy	22	1	Itinerant
Angela	24	1	Itinerant
April	24	1	Itinerant
David	50	2	Self-contained
Doreen	48	2	Itinerant
Jeanette	47	3	Co-teach
Kathie	42	2	Self-contained
Kerri	26	3	Self-contained
Krissy	31	4	Self-contained
Laura	29	5	Self contained
Linda C.	24	2	Itinerant
Linda M.	24	2	Self-contained
Melinda	37	2	Self-contained
Paul	25	3	Co-teach
Rosalee	33	2	Itinerant
Ryan	29	5	Co-teach
Shellie	52	3	Co-teach
Tiffany	25	2	Self-contained

Particular interview topics, relevant to this article, focused on the following four areas:

1. An initial impression of special education paperwork.
2. Discussion of relevant formal education, training, and on the job experiences in regards to paperwork completion.
3. Description of specific helpful paperwork management techniques that they have used.
4. Paperwork management advice for those new to the field.

Responses were recorded, coded, and analyzed, in accordance with grounded theory research techniques (Birks & Mills, 2011). Trustworthiness was addressed in two ways. A colleague familiar with both qualitative research and special education read and coded half of the interviews independently of the researcher. Findings were shared, and categories were refined in accordance with established practices of peer debriefing (Barber & Walczak, 2009).

Secondly, at the conclusion of each question and answer session, respondents were given an email address to submit forms, photographs, and other materials referenced in their narrative. The attachments were then analyzed and incorporated into the research with the intent to triangulate interview data.

Emergent themes were categorized into five distinct paperwork management recommendations. They were (a) get organized; (b) understand your job description; (c) ask for help; (d) appreciate the value of special education paperwork; and (e) know when to take a break. The remainder of this article provides descriptions, comments, and examples for each strategy.

Paperwork Management Recommendations

Get Organized

Respondents stated that strong organizational skills were an immense benefit when it came to the preparation, retrieval, and utilization of special education paperwork. Simple tools such as file folders, labels, and binder clips were all used to alleviate clutter and chaos. It was suggested to develop a reliable system for handling paperwork and stick to it. One way to do so was to create a form that compiles contact information, important dates and communication logs for each roster student. Based upon a composite of respondents' recommendations, Figure 1 illustrates a simple reference sheet that could be printed out and stapled to the inside of each student's binder.

Figure 1. Sample paperwork management organization form.

Student Name: _____
 Parent/Guardian Names: _____
 Address: _____

Home Phone Number: _____ Work Phone Number: _____
 Email Address: _____

IEP annual date: _____

Set up meeting appointment with parents/guardians by: _____
 (No later than 30 days before annual date)

Communication Log

Participant	Method of Communication	Date	Nature of Conversation

A second mentioned suggestion to improve organization and reduce clutter was to regularly eliminate obsolete or outdated materials. It was stated that the regular use of an industrial shredder ensures that confidential documents are disposed of appropriately. Respondents stressed that teachers must know ahead of time what is permissible to discard and when. When in doubt, it was suggested that those new to the field contact an administrator or special education supervisor before taking action.

A third cited area of needed organization and updating is the school computer. The following techniques were recommended to simplify and organize a teacher's database. First, create an electronic folder for each student on the caseload. Next, inside of each folder, store digital documents such as IEPs, scanned copies of student work, and email correspondence with teachers and parents. Explicitly label each file. Third, ensure that the computer, and if possible, the files themselves, are password protected for reasons of confidentiality. By habitually organizing and maintaining records, respondents felt that new teachers would be able to spend less time working with paper and more time working with pupils.

Understand Your Job Description

Some respondents mentioned a sense of disillusionment in regards to how much of their time was spent working on paperwork. As one respondent stated, "I went to school to be a special education teacher, yet I spent most of my day holding meetings and filling out paperwork" Statements such as this one might be attributed to problems associated with role conflict.

Role conflict is defined as a "perceived discrepancy between the type of tasks that a worker regularly engages in and those that they expect to do" (Singh & Billingsley, 1995). It may be especially challenging for novice teachers not prepared for all of the bureaucratic, non-teaching related tasks that they must complete. Past research has suggested that role conflict among special educators has been positively correlated with burn-out (Emhich, 2001) and negatively correlated with job satisfaction (Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001).

In order to reduce potential hazards associated with role conflict, respondents suggested that those new to the field have a clear understanding of the many non-teaching professional responsibilities associated with being a special educator. Frequent and in-depth conversations with a seasoned co-worker or a trusted professor were suggested as ways to help novices cope with the multitude of expected bureaucratic tasks.

Respondents cited numerous internet sources to help novice teachers and teacher-candidates get a more realistic perspective on the profession. Table 2 cites the particular resources referenced by respondents used to meet this objective.

Table 2

Recommended Electronic Resources for Novice Teachers and Teacher-Candidates

Resource Title	Web Address	Description
Reality 101 blog	http://cecblog.typepad.com/	A blog sponsored by the <i>Council for Exceptional Children</i> that records the ongoing professional experiences of a series of beginning special education teachers.
National Association of Special Education Teachers	http://www.naset.org/	Website dedicated to meeting the needs of special education teachers. Extensive information on topics such as behavior management, IEP development, and literacy. Additional resources available with membership.
Special Education Teachers' Chatboard	http://teachers.net/mentors/special_education	Active national electronic bulletin board that allows participants to post questions, ask advice, and share successes with colleagues.
The IRIS Center	http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/	Training website that provides reports, podcasts, and interactive tutorials that align special education research with practice.

Ask for Help

Not all of the respondents' feelings of frustration were attributed to role conflict. Some participants understood what was expected of them, yet felt overwhelmed by the process. Participants shared specific instances of not having sufficient time to complete all that was required of them during the school day. One teacher stated:

Our planning periods are only 50 minutes long and this is when we are expected to do our IEP meetings. So often, I'd have a parent in, and I'd feel as if I had to hurry because the bell was about to ring. They wanted to talk about their child and I felt bad because I was too focused on getting to class. It was difficult because you never knew if there would be someone to cover your class until you got there. My mind was totally scattered during those occasions.

"Don't be afraid to ask for help" was a recurring recommendation among respondents.

One particularly valuable source of help to participants was professional mentors. This is not surprising since research has shown mentors to have a positive impact on beginning teachers. Novices reported feeling more competent and motivated when assigned a mentor (Huling-Austin, 1986, Odell & Ferrarro, 1992). These feelings may extend to the completion of paperwork. Respondents encouraged novice teachers to seek out mentors to answer questions about paperwork and to ask to see quality examples of completed forms.

Another source of help for respondents were co-workers. Interview participants provided the following examples of how they have worked with co-workers in order to lighten the paperwork load on both of them.

- Shared effective organization and time-management techniques.
- Provided feedback for each other on IEP drafts that were particularly lengthy, complex, or out of the ordinary.
- Made a commitment to occasionally cover each other's class if a meeting ran overtime.
- Was available as a sounding board in times of professional stress or frustration.

By collaborating regularly with a co-worker regarding bureaucratic responsibilities, novice special education teachers may better appreciate the old maxim, "many hands lighten the load".

Appreciate the Value of Special Education Paperwork

Respondents were asked to give their initial impression of special education paperwork. Comments included "ever-changing", "ridiculous", and "a pain". Respondents comments were overwhelmingly negative in tone. One possible explanation for this attitude might be a perceived lack of value. The IEP may be perceived as a legal formality, something to draft, sign, and then file away, rather than a useful tool for guiding and supporting a student's education.

Those respondents who found inherent value of the IEP as a educational tool, often referenced specific resources that were used to help them gain a better appreciation of the purpose and function of special education paperwork. In particular, specific textbooks were mentioned that

helped them draft and enact quality IEPs. Table 3 lists the specific book recommendations from respondents to meet this goal (see *Table 3—Inserted After References* section)

Know When to Take a Break

Thorough and accurate paperwork completion can be a very time-consuming endeavor. It is estimated that special education teachers spend an average of five hours per week on paperwork (Carlson, Chen, Schroll, & Klein, 2003; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Interview respondents commented on the difficulty of successfully separating the responsibilities of their professional and personal lives. A second-year teacher shared:

There is a lack of time to prepare during the school day. I cannot do everything I need to get done at once. For example, our school day ends at 2:30, but because of meetings, files and checking papers, today I got home at 6. This is not at all out of the ordinary for me.

Another participant discussed the double-edged sword brought on by the introductory of technology:

Both a curse and blessing this year is that we were assigned laptops so that we could access the IEP program from home. I find myself resorting to taking my paperwork home. It helps me at school; it doesn't help my family or marriage.

Comments such as these underscore the importance of knowing when to take a break.

Activities such as exercise, reading, and church services were mentioned as things that the participants look forward to when they want to take their mind off of work,

It was also recommended to take breaks when drafting an IEP. Respondents felt that the quality of the product would be enhanced if special education teachers were able to complete the forms in smaller, more manageable increments rather than one marathon session. Table 4 presents a composite of suggested strategies to guide a case manager through three mini-sessions of drafting an IEP, based upon guiding questions.

Table 4

Guiding Questions and Examples Designed for IEP Segmentation

Guiding question	Relevant segments of the IEP to complete
1. What is already known about the student?	Student demographics Present level of performance
2. What is the student to accomplish?	Annual goals and benchmarks Assessment Transition plans (as appropriate)
3. How will the student be supported to meet these accomplishments?	Accommodations Modifications Related services Non-participation with non-disabled peers

Final Thoughts

The findings of this exploratory study present a small glimmer of insight regarding how special educators successfully manage their paperwork responsibilities.. The opinions, recommendations and experiences of these eighteen teachers have limited value unless others not only recognize the significance of the paperwork problem, but also work on remediating it. It is suggested that future researchers investigate the efficacy of some of the mentioned practices on a larger scale through empirical means. Researchers should also determine the best ways to decrease the *quantity* of paperwork, while maintaining, or even increasing, its *quality*.

Special education paperwork is not going to go away in the foreseeable future. It is possible that the amount of paperwork may even increase because of both the profession's commitment to data-driven instruction, and the high perceived level of litigiousness of American society.

Understanding and accepting this fact may be the first step to help novice special educators cope with the challenges that they face. The techniques discussed in this article may help address that need. Increased organizational skills, collaborative strategies, and a realistic attitude towards time management may contribute to an educator's ability to instruct students with disabilities in ways that are more thoughtful, thorough, and relevant.

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Table 3

Recommended Books Regarding the IEP Process

Title and Authors	ISBN #	Amazon Product Description
<p><i>Better IEPs How to Develop Legally Correct and Educationally Useful Programs</i></p> <p>By Barbara D. Bateman & Mary Anne Linden</p>	<p>1578615682</p>	<p>A newly revised and enhanced edition of the ultimate guide to understanding IEPs from a legal standpoint, complete with IDEA 2004 updates. A classic in its field, <i>Better IEPs</i> presents a focused, three-step process that zooms in on the individual student and dismisses out of hand the one-size-fits-all approach that is too often mistaken for proper procedure in today's schools. Gives all educators confidence and know-how to develop competent IEPs. Written by Dr. Barbara Bateman, an attorney and professor emeritus and the number one expert on IEP law in the nation, and coauthored by Mary Anne Linden.</p>
<p><i>Aligning IEPs to Academic Standards</i></p> <p>By Ginevra Courtade-Little & Diane M. Browder</p>	<p>1578615488</p>	<p>By following this book, your students with significant disabilities can participate in parallel activities directly related to the general curriculum. For example, when meeting a math state standard in measurement, have the student match coins to a linear jig to purchase an item. The valuable and unique book shows you how to construct student IEPs with goals aligned to each state's academic content standards for each student's assigned grade and ability level.</p>
<p><i>Understanding, Developing, and Writing Effective IEPs: A Step-by-Step Guide for Educators</i></p> <p>By Roger Pierangelo & George A. Giuliani</p>	<p>1412917867</p>	<p>Written by legal and education experts and aligned with the reauthorization of IDEA 2004, this practical resource provides a step-by-step plan for creating, writing, and evaluating IEPs.</p>

<p><i>Wrightslaw: All About IEPs</i> By Peter W.D. Wright Pamela Darr Wright & Sandra Webb O'Connor</p>	<p>1892320207</p>	<p>Whether you are the parent of a child with special education needs, a seasoned educator, or a professional advocate, you have questions about Individualized Education Programs, (IEPs). In this comprehensive, easy to read book, you will find clear, concise answers to frequently asked questions about IEPs. Learn what the law says about IEP Teams and IEP Meetings, Parental Rights and Consent, Steps in Developing the IEP, Placement, Transition, Assistive Technology and Strategies to Resolve Disagreements.</p>
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