Writing Strength-Based IEPs for Students with Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

Throughout this practitioner-oriented paper, we provide a rationale, framework, and supporting materials to promote the development and implementation of personalized, contextualized, and holistic individualized education plans (IEPs) with a strength-based orientation. We believe that adopting strength-based IEP writing practices is vital to reconstructing students with disabilities as capable contributors to their inclusive classrooms. The use of strengths-based approaches is not necessarily new, however supporting individuals' needs in a strength-based model has been largely overlooked in special education. Despite their growing application, inclusive pedagogical approaches are largely absent in the development of strength-based IEPs for students with disabilities. IEPs remain largely deficit-focused with only surface level attention given to documenting students' strengths and abilities. When present levels academic performance statements and IEP goals are written in a deficit-oriented manner, special educators miss opportunities to see beyond the limitations and challenges that their students may face, and instead, overly focus on the shortcomings of the student. However, by adopting a strength-based approach, special educators can instead focus their attention on remediating these deficits by paying attention to the student as an individual and highlight their students' many strengths and capabilities.

Keywords: Strength-based IEPs, inclusive education, person-centered planning (PCP), action plan meetings.

Introduction

Throughout this practitioner-oriented paper, we aim to provide teachers with supporting materials that can be used in the development and implementation of personalized, contextualized, and holistic individualized education plans (IEPs) that utilize a strength-based orientation. Although IEP's originated from the United States context, the development and implementation of important legal documents that are supportive of students and families with disabilities, like the IEP, are an important aspect of many countries legislative mechanisms for supporting students with disabilities (Alkahtani & Kheirallah, 2016; European Agency for the Development in Special Needs Education, 2009; Mitchell, Morton, & Hornby, 2010; Shaddock, MadDonald, Hook, Giorcelli, & Arthur-Kelly, 2009). Although from country to country these documents may differ, Mitchell et al. (2010) assert that "IEPs are ubiquitous, virtually every country's special education provisions containing them as a key element to its provisions for students with special education needs" (p. iii). Within the United States legal context,

> The IEP serves as a blueprint for the child's special education needs and any related services. The IEP team consists of the parent(s), the student (if appropriate), at least one of the child's regular classroom education teachers, at least one of the child's special education teachers, and a qualified representative of the public agency (United States Department of Education, 2017, p. 1).

We believe that adopting strength-based IEP writing practices is vital to reconstructing students with disabilities as capable contributors to their inclusive classrooms (Weishaar, 2010). Positioning students as both capable and valuable supports recommended practices of maintaining high expectations for all students. Writing strength-based IEPs is a way to formalize the use of strengths-based practices in schools. The level of educational opportunity and benefit

that students with disabilities are expected to receive continues to be debated. As we will explain later in the paper, the most recent legal decision within the U.S. Supreme Court continues to push us forward in terms of providing high quality education programs that meet the needs of students with disabilities. We also consider writing strength-based IEPs to be a means for teachers to facilitate the creation of caring learning communities where all students and their families learn together.

We begin this paper with vignettes that highlight two different approaches to writing present levels of academic performance statements (shortened throughout rest of the manuscript as "present levels statements") in IEPs. Next, we describe what strength-based practices are and situate them within inclusive education. Following we offer a legal framework that explains the legal impetus for employing such practices. We then suggest person-centered plans (PCPs) as a logical starting point for writing strength-based IEPs. Finally, we offer an in-depth description and discussion of what strength-based IEP writing is, including examples and resources for writing strength-based present levels statements, IEP goals, and tools for establishing ongoing communication that can be used by practitioners.

Following are two vignettes about a student named, Franklin. Throughout this paper and within the vignettes below, we purposefully use phrases like "students have labels of..." to acknowledge the socially constructed and subjective nature of disability, and how such labels are placed on people who are not thought of as "normal" (Taylor, 2006). These are authentic cases from our teaching experiences in New York State. We use these two examples of present levels statements to illustrate the impact of strength-based writing. Consider what you know about Franklin and his current performance based on each of these scenarios:

1. *Franklin is a second-grade student who has labels of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and an intellectual disability. Franklin often has difficulty staying on task and focused. He also has a hard time comprehending and recalling material. Currently, Franklin is on grade level for math, but is well below grade level in reading. Specifically, Franklin has a hard time comprehending and recalling information read from a text. Because of these difficulties, Franklin is often unable to recall information from both independent reading books and books read aloud.*

2. *Franklin is a friendly young boy who enjoys trains and tall buildings. Franklin is timid in new situations but warms up to people quickly. He is a hard-working second grade student who enjoys attending school, working with his teachers, and developing relationships with peers. He enjoys and excels in math. During math instruction, he likes to use manipulatives when working to solve a given problem. Currently, Franklin is working at mastering double-digit addition problems. When given 10 double-digit addition problems, Franklin gets an average of six correct. However, when given assistance, such as the teacher drawing a line between the two-digit number, Franklin is able to solve them correctly most of the time, as long as there are no carryovers. Franklin has labels of intellectual disability and ADHD that affect him academically because it is more difficult for him to comprehend and remember material, and his label of ADHD makes it harder for him to stay on task and focus for the duration of a lesson. These challenges are often evident during reading instruction. Specifically, he often has difficulty recalling information from both independent reading books at the first-*

grade level. For example, when prompted by saying, "Did _____ happen in

the story?" Franklin often guesses, it is unclear if he comprehended what

occurred in the story. However, when Franklin is given a graphic organizer to

write down key aspects of the story and a peer buddy, he is able to more easily

recall and pull out relevant textual information. Further, when these supports are

paired with a text of his choice, he is able to pull out key events and details of the

text with little adult assistance and he is able to recall information from the text

more consistently.

What significant differences in language and student support do you notice in each? If Franklin was a student in your class, what kinds of expectations would have for him? How would your understanding of Franklin in each situation affect how you would approach teaching him? What influences do you think the two approaches have on the lives of the respective students and their families? Which scenario best represents what you experience at your school site? Which one would you consider best practice?

The descriptions in these present levels statements vary considerably. Most obviously, the second statement provides a more nuanced portrait of Franklin, including data points and individualized adaptations that have proven to be successful. By contrast, the first provides a more limited and generalized portrait of Franklin as a student and his overall performance rankings as compared to grade level expectations in reading and math. The overarching focus of the first statement, is on the label and resulting limitations, while the second provides a more holistic and strength-based portrait of Franklin. The language used to describe students, such as Franklin, often frames how educational professionals think about them (Biklen, 1992; Linton, 1998). Describing Franklin in either manner can have a tremendous impact on the resulting goals

that are designed for him and which services and supports are subsequently made available to him. In other words, the language used to describe a student can translate to different educational opportunities offered based on the expectations expressed for the student. When present levels statements are written in a more deficit-oriented manner educational professionals miss opportunities to see beyond the limitations and challenges that the student may face, and instead, overly focus on the shortcomings of the student (Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001). However, by adopting a strength-based approach they could instead focus their attention on remediating these deficits by paying attention to the student as an individual holistically and through the use of their many strengths and capabilities.

An Overview of Strength-Based Approaches

Strengths-based approaches are not new, however, supporting individuals in strength-based models have been largely overlooked in education, particularly in special education. Weishaar (2010) notes that the counseling field shifted away from the traditional medical model which focused on pathology, to a strengths-based model focused on clients' assets in the 1990's. Jones-Smith (2011) also acknowledges the efficacy of strength-based approaches in the field of social work and also more recently, in business. At present, best educational practices advocate for strengths-based approaches to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation. Jones-Smith (2011) argues that instead of targeting weaknesses, strength-based approaches are necessary for fostering self-determination, self-efficacy, self-control, and academic achievement.

Within the scope of strengths-based approaches, there are numerous recent calls by scholars to incorporate person-centered planning approaches into education, and many specifically related to student and family participation in IEP meetings (Kelley, Bartholomew, &

Test, 2013; Meadan, Sheldon, Appel, & DeCrazia, 2010; Rehfeldt, Clark, & Lee, 2012; Test et al., 2004; Wells & Sheehey, 2012). Research studies have focused on the impact and satisfaction of students and families based on their level of involvement in IEP meetings (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010; Kelley et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2006; Meadan et al., 2010; Neale & Test, 2010; Rehfeldt et al., 2012; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012).

Processes that promote and ensure meaningful collaboration between professionals and families are a key aspect of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Department of Education, 2004). Using information gathered from a variety of stakeholders, including families, to write IEPs offers a more holistic portrait of who the child is because it provides opportunities for meaningful relationships to develop between schools and families, as well as natural and salient opportunities for knowledge sharing. The attention given to parent and student involvement is a necessary aspect of strength-based approaches and is encouraging (Department of Education, 2004), however, a necessary next step is developing a body of literature that clearly articulates how to translate those recommendations into writing the IEP, and how to utilize these approaches to ensure access to the general education curriculum. We have identified the integration of strength-based IEP writing practices as a potential solution for addressing this gap in the literature, and as a necessary next step in practice. We believe IEPs should be reflective of strength-based perspectives and written in strengths-based language (Weishaar, 2010). This approach has been encouraged by recent legislation within the United States.

Legal Framework

Writing a student's IEP from a strengths-based orientation is one potential way to ensure that a student's IEP is designed to meet the rigorous demands of the law and to best serve the

educational rights of a student. U.S. special education law provides a legal basis for advancing

best practices to include the use of strength-based IEPs. Federal regulations of the IDEA require

that all students receiving special education services have an IEP in place that is developed,

reviewed, and revised in a meeting at least annually (Department of Education, 2004; United

States Department of Education, 2006). Under the IDEA (as cited in McGlaughlin, 2016), the

IEP must include the following the components:

- A statement of the child's present levels of academic achievement and functional
  performance;

- A statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals
  designed to: Meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the
  child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum and meet
  each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability;

- For children with disabilities who take alternate assessments aligned to alternate
  achievement standards, a description of benchmarks or short-term objectives;

- A description of how the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals described in
  34 CFR 300.320(a)(2) will be measured and when periodic reports on the progress the
  child is making toward meeting the annual goals (such as through the use of quarterly or
  other periodic reports, concurrent with the issuance of report cards) will be provided;

- A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and
  services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the
  child, or on behalf of the child;

- A statement of any individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure
  the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on State and district

wide assessments consistent with section 612(a)(16) of the Act and if the IEP Team

determines that the child must take an alternate assessment and why the particular

alternate assessment selected is appropriate for the child (p. 85).

If the IEP requirements are not met, legal protections are embedded through IDEA under the

principles of IEP and procedural safeguards. IDEA mandates for non-discriminatory evaluation

also require that the IEP be developed by a multidisciplinary team. Therefore, writing and

maintaining compliant IEPs is the responsibility of all educational practitioners on student's

educational team.

The recent 2017 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School

District,* strengthens the legal imperative for providing a comprehensive and high quality, "free

and appropriate public education, or FAPE, by means of a uniquely tailored individualized

education program, or IEP" (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 2017). At the heart of

the Endrew case was a determination about the degree of opportunity schools must provide to

meet their substantive obligation under the IDEA to support students in making appropriate

progress in the general education curriculum. In determining what it means to "meet the unique

needs of a child with a disability, the provisions of the IDEA governing the IEP development

process provide guidance" (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Syllabus, 2017, p. 3).

More specifically, the Endrew decision syllabus (2017) states that:

(a) child's educational program must be appropriately ambitious in light of his

circumstances, just as advancement from grade to grade is appropriately ambitious for

most children in the regular classroom. The goals may differ, but every child should have

the chance to meet challenging objectives. This standard is more demanding than the

'merely more than de minimis' test applied by the Tenth Circuit. (p.3)

The quote above reasserts a higher standard than the previously held minimum standard for schools to provide specifically designed instruction that meets the needs of students with disabilities. Within that expectation students with disabilities must be provided with high quality and meaningful access to the general education curriculum and educational opportunities that are "substantially equal to the educational opportunities that are provided for students without disabilities" (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District Syllabus, 2017, p. 3). The Endrew decision reinforces that the essential function of the IEP is to set out a plan for students to make appropriate educational progress. We argue that one-way educational professionals could meet this responsibility is by understanding their students' abilities and using their strengths as a basis for addressing their needs and developing their IEPs.

As another of its major principles, the parent participation section of the IDEA (Department of Education, 2004) establishes mandates for parent and student participation and shared decision-making. Criteria for this principle state that:

(a) Public agency responsibility-general. Each public agency shall take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate, including-

(1) Notifying parents of the meeting early enough to ensure that they will have an opportunity to attend; and

(2) Scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed on time and place…

2) For a student with a disability beginning at age 14, or younger, if appropriate, the notice must also:

(i) Indicate that a purpose of the meeting will be the development of a statement of the transition services needs of the student required in 300.347(b)(1); and

(ii) Indicate that the agency will invite the student. (§300.345)

This expectation for student and family participation throughout the IEP process established a legal precedent for person-centered approaches over the institution-centered approaches that have been used historically (Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003). This is an important distinction because where traditional special education approaches have focused on institutionally-driven outcomes and bureaucratic requirements, person-centered planning methods are intentionally collaborative, value-driven, and can be mutually beneficial. Efforts to comply with IDEA mandates for greater involvement and input from students with disabilities and their families was a push forward toward more schools and IEP teams adopting person-centered planning methods. The results of two case studies by Keyes and Owens-Johnson indicate that the use of person-centered planning methods was highly effective as measured by improved student outcomes, improved home-school collaborations, and more efficient collaborative completion of legally required documentation by school professionals. All of these outcomes also further support effective inclusion practices.

Inclusive Education and Person-Centered Plans

For the purposes of this paper,

Inclusive education means everyone is included in their grade-level in their neighborhood school. Inclusion means students are given the help they need to be full members of their class. Inclusive education involves districts supporting schools as they include ALL [emphasis in original] the students who live in their communities. (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation [SWIFT], 2018, p. 1)

Though not an easy task, providing *all* students with and without disabilities access to the

general education curriculum is the job of *all* teachers. If students do not learn the way we teach,

it is our responsibility as educators to change the way we teach. It is also the law as required by

educational placements in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (United States Department of

Education, 2006). Providing all students with disabilities access to the general education

curriculum begins with presumptions of competence (Jorgensen, 2005). This provides a

foundation for a strength-based PCP, which is then used as written justification for required

adaptations or modifications to the general education content.

Recognizing that disability can be understood as a social construction through which

through which social practices (e.g., schools and education) maintain deficit-based assumptions

of disability (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008; Hamre, Oyler, & Bejoian, 2006), we

believe that a strength-based approaches to writing IEPs is one way of promoting social justice

within special education practices (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003).

Such deficit-based views of disability reinforce oppressive conditions for people with disabilities

in society (Connor et al., 2008; Hamre et al., 2006). Research shows that such perceptions have a

negative impact on school-family partnerships in special education including silencing students

and parents, and diminishing collaboration amongst professionals and families (Biklen, 1992;

Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003).

If students with disabilities are acknowledged as competent individuals by IEP teams

from the outset of the planning process, the likelihood of them being successful in the general

education classroom increases (Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, 2010). Research also shows that

students with disabilities who spend more time in inclusive settings with their peers without

disabilities: perform significantly better on academic achievement tests than students with

similar disabilities who spend more time in segregated classrooms (Hehir, Grindal, & Eidelman, 2012; Waldron, Cole, & Majd, 2001), do *not* negatively impact peers without disabilities in their classrooms (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998), and provide students with disabilities with better predictive life outcomes (e.g., build meaningful social relationships, achieve positive behavioral outcomes, and graduate from high school, college and beyond (SWIFT, 2018; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006).

Person-Centered Planning

In-depth knowledge of students is foundational to writing strength-based IEPs. One way to obtain in-depth knowledge about each student is by initiating Person-Centered Planning (PCP) as soon as possible upon the student's arrival in a district, school, and/or caseload. There are many effective approaches and tools to PCP including: Essential Lifestyle Planning (Smull & Harrison, 1992), Personal Futures Planning (Mount, 2000), Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1991). For the purposes of this paper, we connect the process of writing strength-based IEPs to the McGill Action Planning System (MAPS) (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989)**.**

Six central tenets are central to the MAPs process and include: (1) all students belong to and learn together in a general education classroom; (2) general educators can and do teach all students; (3) necessary supports will be provided inclusively; (4) inclusive education is a right, not a privilege to be earned; (5) all students can succeed and graduate; and (6) creative alternatives for learning will be provided for students who learn in non-traditional ways (Forest, Pearpoint, & O'Brien, 1996). The MAPs process is comprised of the following essential components: the meeting is recorded graphically; the meeting is held in a welcoming

environment; key stakeholders are present; main issues are addressed; a concrete plan is developed; and a follow-up meeting is scheduled.

When planning a MAPS meeting, the location should be in a place that is comfortable for the person with a disability, their family, and their support network (e.g., not at a school). The person with a disability should be as active as they feel comfortable within the meeting. Anyone who is an invested stakeholder in the individual's life should be invited to the meeting. Stakeholders can include but are not limited to: parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors, social workers, therapists, and teachers. Invitees could also include community members that interact with the individual on a regular basis such as grocery store clerks and restaurant managers. If the individual is seeking employment, inviting potential employers may be appropriate as well.

There should be a facilitator to run the meeting and a scribe to write down group ideas as they arise. The facilitator of the meeting should be someone who is familiar with the MAPS process and is comfortable leading meetings (e.g., the special education teacher). Table 1 outlines the MAPS process and how it relates to writing strength-based IEPs.

Table 1

The MAPS Process and their Application(s) to Writing Strength-Based IEPs

MAPS Process	Connection to writing strength-based IEPs
1. What is the individual's history?	The target student's history is important so the team knows important milestones, what has worked in the past, and what has not worked. This question can serve as the foundation for the present levels statements as required throughout the IEP.

2. What is your dream for the individual?	It is critical that the team dream big so goals are not only rooted in the present. Dreaming 5, 10, and 15 years down the line (if possible) is helpful to set current IEP goals on a trajectory for future success (e.g., living away from home, attending university, gainful employment) and to ensure involvement in the transition planning process which is recommended throughout, but is required by age 14 (IDEA, 2004, §300.347(b)(1)(i)).
3. What is your nightmare?	Identifying the nightmare is vital (and difficult) so the team knows which path(s) they do not want the target student to go down (e.g., being alone). If the target student begins to go down this path, the IEP team should reconvene and adjust goals and supports as necessary to align with MAPS goals.
4. Who is the individual?	Everyone contributes a word that describes the target student. These words are narrowed down to a few keywords that capture the essence of the target student. This question can serve as the foundation for writing present levels statements in the IEP.
5. What are the individual's strengths, gifts, and abilities?	This question helps to construct the target student in a strength-based manner rather than focusing on deficits. This question can also inform the present levels statements sections for subject-specific goals (e.g., math) and to plan for meaningful access to the curriculum on the IEP.
6. What are the individual's needs?	Identifying the needs (not deficiencies) is as critical as it is important for the team to know what types of supports the target student requires to be successful (e.g., a book on tape for reading comprehension). These supports can be used to complete sections on the IEP related to assistive technology, testing accommodations, and designated instructional services (DIS) (e.g., occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, adaptive physical education).
7. What would the individual's ideal day at school look like, and what must be done to make it happen?	Members of the team contribute ideas about what types of support are needed to help the target student to be successful in inclusive environments alongside age-appropriate peers. These questions can help inform the services section in the IEP as well as justify the target student's percent of time spent in inclusive settings.

Questions adapted from Vandercook et al. (1989)

Once the MAPS process is completed, the facilitator/special educator should have a comprehensive and strength-based composite of who the target student is and what they have to contribute to their future inclusive classrooms, universities, and workplaces. Not only is MAPS one way of getting to know students with disabilities and their families, but it also increases the family's participation and satisfaction with the IEP process and increases teamwork and collaboration from the start (Weishaar, 2010). The MAPs process is not designed to take the place of an IEP. Rather, it can a help establish a powerful, strength-based foundation for an IEP, and set in motion a process to fully include a student in their community. It is not meant to be a neutral exercise, but rather a tool to develop a plan of inclusive action (Forest et al., 1996).

Writing Strength-Based Present Levels Statements and IEP Goals

Within the U.S., the IEP is often the first introduction of the student to their teachers and other professionals. The description of students as documented on an IEP, as deficient and incapable, can lead to team members forming misconceptions and/or negative understanding about the student. This framing of students often begins with how the student is described within the student's present levels statements, which subsequently influence and are the foundation for the remainder of the document (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). Present levels statements are often written under each area of performance (e.g., academic, social-emotional, management, physical). Very frequently this section is outdated or underdeveloped, sometimes with only one or two sentences (Howey, 2013). Statements discussing the student's needs, weaknesses, or skill gaps often form the bulk of the present levels statements. In order to remedy this, we suggest that IEP teams begin by taking what they have learned from the PCP process and translating this

information into the IEP.

Developing Strength-Based Present Levels Statements

Using the information gathered from PCP meetings, the IEP team should create a comprehensive and strength-based student composite for writing present levels statements. Since the premise of writing strength-based IEPs focuses on the student's strengths as a key aspect in both describing their abilities and talents, the present levels statements should begin with describing the student's strengths, capabilities, talents, and interests. For example, the second presents level statement for Franklin highlights his interests in trains and buildings and includes his strengths in forming relationships and working with peers. By highlighting these attributes, the IEP team can then use this information to plan for and augment learning and teaching opportunities by keeping these strengths, capabilities, talents, and interests in mind. Since writing strength-based present levels statements provides an emancipatory and empowering framework, using this information positions the student as a multifaceted individual, who is full of potential, and is ever-evolving. Further, since both strengths and successes are prominent features of strength-based IEPs, practitioners should begin the strength-based writing process with instructional strategies that provide a capacity centered starting point for every student.

Within the present levels statements, in tandem to recording student's strengths, the IEP team must then identify and document what is already taking place within the classroom and school that has proven to be supportive of the student's learning and growth. In the case of Franklin, this includes strategies and supports such as manipulatives, graphic organizers, and peer supports. Highlighting what is working well within the present levels statements is vital to creating meaningful learning opportunities within the classroom that foster the continuing

growth and progress of the student. After highlighting strengths and what is already working, the IEP team can move into documenting the specific challenges and needs of the student.

Strength-based IEP writing does not ignore or avoid the effect of the disability or other difficulties the student experiences in school. Instead, within the present levels statements teachers practicing strength-based IEP writing should describe the disability along with specific challenges and support needs associated with a student's disability label in mind. This includes providing and documenting detailed examples that illustrate under which conditions and demands the student experiences these challenges and needs (e.g., times of the day, specific subject/content areas, grouping strategies).

By focusing on problem solving, as well as providing specific and contextualized information about when and how the challenge or need arises, practitioners can plan for and develop strategies and supports that are built into their pedagogical practices and learning environments from the outset. For example, in the case of Franklin, this includes naming specific strategies that support his challenges and needs in math and reading. Writing strength-based present levels statements influences the entire IEP, so it is vital that the statements provide a strength-based view of the student that the IEP team can utilize to develop appropriate goals and identify appropriate services for the student. Further, by positioning the student in this holistic manner, the IEP team has a solid foundation to drive the development of the remainder of the document.

Developing Strength-Based IEP Goals

After developing the present levels statements, the IEP team can then utilize that information to develop student goals and objectives that stem from the specific strengths and

needs of the student. The IEP team should use the needs and challenges that were described

within the present levels statements to determine appropriate annual goals, supports, and services

that further the development of the student. In general, when writing IEP goals, we recommend

that IEP teams employ the SMART strategy (Jung, 2007) outlined with examples and guiding

questions in Table 2.

Table 2

Writing SMART Goals

Attribute	Description & Example	Guiding Questions and Prompts to consider
Specific	Each goal should specifically state what the child will do. Your goal should include what the child will do, in what setting they will do it, what accuracy they should do it with, and what kinds of support they require. Example: By November 2017 **(when)**, when given a second-grade text in his general education classroom **(where)**, Franklin **(who)** will be able to retell the story **(what)**, or explain the main idea with 1 verbal prompt **(how)** from a teacher or a peer on 8/10 opportunities as measured by a teacher-created data sheet.	● Can someone else understand the goal? Have you addressed the following: who, what, when, where, how?
Measurable	Each goal should specifically state how the skill is measured. It should state not only how data will be collected, but exactly what percentage/accuracy will be attained. Example: By November 2017, when given a second-grade text in his general education classroom, Franklin will be able to retell the story, or explain the main idea with 1 verbal prompt from a teacher or a peer on 8/10 opportunities as measured by a teacher-created data sheet **(quantitative assessment)**.	● Can you measure the goal using either quantitative (numbers) or qualitative (observable) assessments?

Attainable	Make sure that the goal you develop is something that you reasonably expect that the child will accomplish in the given time frame. It should challenge the student and be realistic. Example: By November 2017 (**first marking period**), when given a second-grade text in his general education classroom, Franklin will be able to retell the story, or explain the main idea with 1 verbal prompt from a teacher or a peer on 8/10 opportunities as measured by a teacher-created data sheet.	● Is the goal achievable within one year? We suggest writing benchmark goals that align with marking periods/report cards throughout the year.
Relevant	The goal should be relevant to each student's individual and educational needs. Each goal should be customized to the student's current needs. Example: By November 2017, when given a second-grade text in his general education classroom (**current environment**), Franklin will be able to retell the story, or explain the main idea with 1 verbal prompt from a teacher or a peer (**available supports in current environment**) on 8/10 opportunities as measured by a teacher-created data sheet.	● Is the goal realistic and relevant to the child within the current environment, given existing constraints or circumstances?
Time-Bound	Each goal should explicitly say when the goal will be achieved. Example: By January 2018 (**second marking period**), when given a second-grade text in his general education classroom, Franklin will be able to retell the story, or explain the main idea independently (**increased skill**) on 8/10 opportunities as measured by a teacher-created data sheet.	● Is there a specific timeline for meeting the goal? If the student meets the goal for the first benchmark, the next goal should be aligned with the next marking period with an increased skill level noted in the new goal.

IEP goals that employ the SMART strategy can leverage information provided within present levels statements to develop specific and contextualized goals. In essence, the IEP team should think about how they can use the student's strengths, talents, abilities, and understand

what is already working to bolster students' continued growth and progress on annual goals. For example, the IEP team may develop an annual goal that provides specific faded supports (i.e. strategies, supports, and scaffolds that are incrementally removed or adjusted) that are based on the knowledge described in the present levels statements. For example, the description of Franklin at the beginning of this paper serves to illustrate this. A goal that employs the SMART strategy and strength-based writing practices could state:

> *When given a text at the second-grade level, a graphic organizer, and peer support, Franklin will be able to verbally recall four out of five comprehension level questions about the text as measured by a teacher-created checklist by the end of the school year.*

Since the strength-based present levels statement for Franklin provides specific information about his needs and 'what already works', the IEP team has readily available scaffolds that can be used to support Franklin's continued growth and progress. With the example goal above, once Franklin has shown progress on the goal with supports (e.g., graphic organizer, peer assistance), the scaffolds can be removed, or their need can be re-evaluated. Further, the IEP team can choose to include specific information about strengths, abilities, and talents from present levels statements in crafting goals. By using the present levels statements as a foundation for employing the SMART strategy, annual IEP goals can be written in a manner that honors the student and their capabilities. This process of using specific and contextualized information about the student can be mirrored in selecting appropriate services and supports in developing the rest of the required elements of the IEP that are outlined within the legal framework above.

Action Planning Meetings and Ongoing Communication

In the previous section, we outlined how to use present levels statements to develop strength-based SMART IEP goals. In this section, we discuss how special education teachers and IEP teams can monitor student progress relative to the SMART IEP goals and make strength-based approaches standard practice in schools. One strategy is to implement regular action plan meetings. An action planning approach to inclusive school reform has been used to transform organization of schools so stakeholders, including families, have more control (Sailor, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Skrtic, & Oas, 1996), to initiate and coordinate integrated services for inclusive education (Sailor, 1996), and to monitor intervention services for students with disabilities (Amato, 1996).

The first step is to introduce the concept to all parents of students with disabilities with a letter home the first week of school (or upon student arrival at your school). Appendix A provides a sample parent letter that can be used for this purpose. A parent letter should:

- Introduce the concept of action plan meetings

- Justify the placement of their child in an age-appropriate general education class

- Provide choice for when the parent wants to meet

- Use a strength-based approach to supporting students with disabilities

For students with complex support needs, consistent meetings should be scheduled every six to eight weeks. However, if a student is in crisis, then the team should meet as frequently as needed to adequately communicate and adjust student supports. Similarly, if a student does not have complex support needs, less frequent action plan meetings are appropriate, or even the annual IEP meeting would suffice. The letter should also pose a routine meeting day during

which most action plan meetings will be held and propose times that are convenient to parents. This will clearly vary depending on school and district procedures for implementing such meetings and family availability.

Once the information has been gathered, the special education teacher sets up the schedule for all families on their caseload and sends confirmation notes to all members of each student's IEP team. See Appendix B for a sample IEP team action plan letter. This IEP team letter should:

- Formally engage families and all members of the IEP team in the process (including the student)

- Communicate the action plan meeting dates *early* in the school year (within the first few weeks of school)

- Be flexible to include parent-teacher conferences and pre-/IEP meeting dates as needed

- Clearly articulate an inclusive team approach to supporting students with disabilities

If DIS providers (e.g., occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists) cannot attend a meeting given that they may have very large caseloads or be split between multiple school buildings, it is important they still communicate student progress in a way that can be shared with the team (e.g., via email to be cut and pasted into meeting minutes). These meetings are not meant to be parent-teacher conferences, unless the scheduling falls during parent-teacher conference weeks. Rather, they are meant to be brief check-ins to monitor the strength-based supports for students with disabilities in general education classrooms. It is expected that all team members share a) what is going well, and b) what areas need more support, and record any team suggestions and decisions made. Having regular action plan

meetings creates natural opportunities to identify and respond to small issues before they become larger ones, helps to maintain positive, strength-based supports for students with disabilities, and supports the team in providing instruction in inclusive general education settings.

Action plan meetings also provide an organized forum through which the IEP team can collaboratively write strength-based IEPs. As defined by the IDEA (2004), §300.347(a), these meetings can be written as a required component of a student's IEP. 'Team meetings' with frequency and duration specifications (e.g., bimonthly for 30 minutes) can be included under the required section on statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel. Including team meetings on a student's IEP provides legal impetus to ensure that the necessary meetings will be held.

Implications for Practice

The implementation of strength-based IEPs has the potential to maintain high expectations and push students toward higher levels of academic achievement through services, supports, and goals that are written based on student strengths. This is of particular importance as the new U.S. Supreme Court ruling, *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, affirms that 'merely more than de minimis' (i.e., schools providing minimal educational benefit to students with disabilities), does not align with the spirit of IDEA. In order to adhere to this important new legal precedent, teachers must be able to write strength-based IEPs that increase educational benefit for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. If schools around the nation begin doing this, students with disabilities will be more meaningfully included and gaining much more than a minimum benefit from their school experience.

On a more localized level, teachers' writing and implementing strength-based IEPs has the transformative potential to reconstruct students with disabilities as positive contributors to their communities. It also can increase the time students with disabilities receive services in general education classrooms which can translate into more student access to core academic content. This increased access would come from DIS providers (e.g., occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, adaptive physical education teachers) providing their services within the general education setting and not pull the child out of the classroom causing them to miss academic content. Decades of literature now discuss the positive educational outcomes for *all* students associated with inclusive practices (Bui et al., 2010; Hehir et al., 2012; Helmstetter, Curry, Brennan, & Sampson-Saul, 1998; Hunt & Farron-Davis, 1992; Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, & Goetz, 1994; McDonnell, Thorson, & McQuivey, 2000; McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998; SWIFT, 2018; Wagner et al., 2006; Waldron et al., 2001).

More time in inclusive settings also means more access for students with disabilities to their peers without disabilities. Increased peer interaction can lead to students across campuses understanding disability as a valued form of diversity (Kunc, 1992; Schwarz, 2007). Such perspectives aid in the transformation of schools from locations rife with segregated practices into schools where special education is truly a service rather than a place and where cultures of inclusion are the norm (Schwarz, 2007). As stated in the Legal Framework section above, these transformations, influenced by the use of person-centered planning methods, are highly effective at producing better student outcomes, improved home-school collaborations, and more efficient collaborative completion of legally required documentation by school professionals (Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003).

In terms of school-specific outcomes and collaboration, implementing these strength-based IEP processes can improve data collection and progress monitoring practices by providing a standardized method for documenting a student's strengths and competencies, as well as offering a way to establish positive expectations for the child (Rudolph & Epstein, 2000; Saleebey, 1992). Since IEP teams would meet more frequently through action plan meetings, there is naturally more time to share student successes and brainstorm and implement effective supports. Such collaborative structures similarly draw families into the IEP process placing them and their child at the positively-constructed center of all educational decisions. Involving students with disabilities and their families intimately in the IEP process is paramount especially as students age out of schools and programs and into the workforce and/or higher education. Our collective teaching experience, as well as research by Sanford et al. (2011), show that deficit-based approaches to supporting students with disabilities have very real consequences including lower income potential, higher rates of unemployment, and increased rates of incarceration. In summary, we suggest the steps outlined in Figure 1 in order to institute strength-based IEPs within schools.
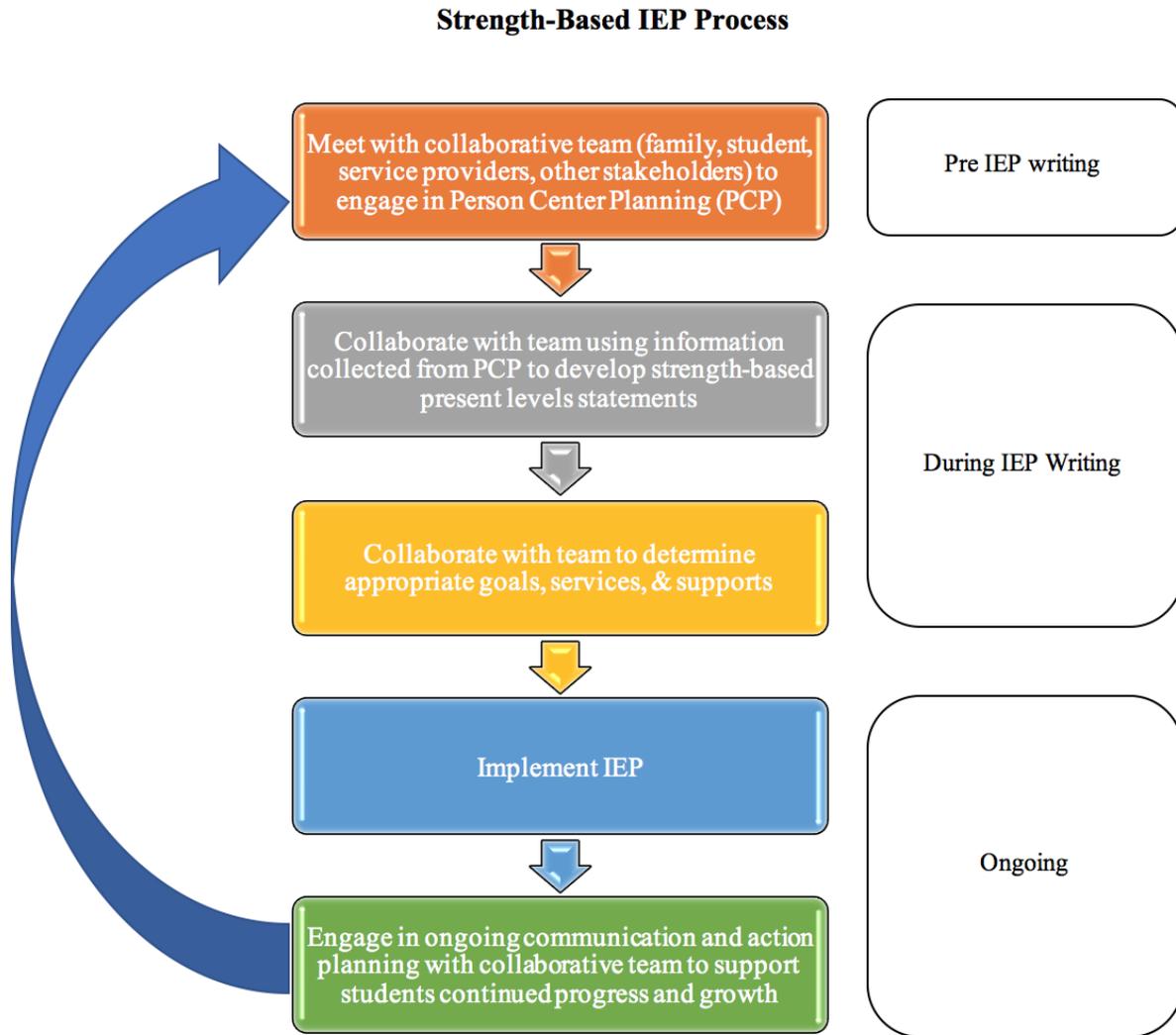
Strength-Based IEP Process

Figure 1. The strength-based IEP process.

Final Thoughts

Educators around the world have immense power over how students with disabilities are perceived and taught in schools. This power includes the choices *all* educators make about the language they use to describe students. As a result, educators in all countries, including the U.S., need to continue thinking about how to develop awareness around disability and recognize the abilities and strengths of their students.

Educators worldwide must also grapple with how best to implement educational programming for all students, including students with disabilities, in their international contexts. When vital legal documents that support and provide services to individuals with disabilities are written in a deficit-oriented manner, individuals, including educators and service providers miss opportunities to see beyond the limitations and challenges that their students may face, and instead, overly focus on the shortcomings of the individual. However, by adopting a strength-based approach within education, teachers can instead focus their attention on responding to students' educational needs by paying attention to the student as an individual and highlight their students' many strengths and capabilities. We propose that shifting the ways teachers write and implement legal documents away from traditional deficit-based approaches to strengths-based formats is a necessary next step.

As stated above, we believe that strength-based approaches to writing IEPs is one way of promoting socially-situated and socially just practices in special educations can be used to counter practices that silence students and parents, and diminish collaboration amongst professionals and families (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Keyes & Owens-Johnson, 2003). As demonstrated within PCP, socially just practices must redistribute power within the IEP process, and place students and families at the center of the decision-making process. We believe that the Endrew (2017) decision is an indicator of the U.S. Supreme Court's interpretation of the law which implores educators to move beyond minimum compliance according to the letter of the law, and work steadfastly toward the spirit of the law. Now, the expectation to support each student in reaching their full potential exists as the legal standard in the U.S. We hope that this standard will come to fruition not just in the United States, but in educating all students with disabilities worldwide. Reiterating Mitchell et al.'s conclusion that the role of IEPs "should

ultimately lead to a high standard of education for students with special education needs, as reflected in the educational outcomes and the best possible quality of life for such students" (p. 64). The detailed mandates and additional recommendations discussed within this paper may also serve as exemplars to inform upcoming and expanding international disability law in additional international contexts. In combination, the use of strength-based approaches and strength-based IEPs can move us forward in our global educational pursuits for social justice and best practices.

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Appendix A

Sample Action Plan Parent Letter

Dear Families,

In order to better support the needs of our students, as they are included in general education classes, I would like to set up team meetings for your child. These meetings will include the IEP team as scheduling permits.

The purpose of these meetings will be to create an action plan that is aimed at successfully including your child into their age-appropriate general education classroom. We will discuss what supports are working for your child, what supports need to be modified for your child, and how we can modify curriculum to meet the ever-changing needs of your child.

These meetings will *not* be parent-teacher conferences, but rather team meetings that outline supports needed for your child. These meetings will inform each teacher and instructional aide what steps need to be taken to successfully support your child in the general education classroom. These meetings will last anywhere from 30-45 minutes **maximum** and can be done every 6-8 weeks. I know that everybody has a busy schedule (including teachers) so please send this letter back to me and let me know the following so I can plan appropriately:

- Student's name: _____

- I want to meet every   6 weeks_____   8 weeks _____

- This time is best for me: _____

Remember (name of school) has a minimum day every (specific day) and students are released at (specific time), so this day is typically the best for the IEP team. It is extremely difficult to get the team together on another day, so please try to keep (specific day) open. Please let me know what works best for you. I feel these meetings will keep everyone on our team on the same page and help maximize every student's potential.

Thank you for your feedback. I look forward to collaborating with all of you this year.

Sincerely,

Teacher's name

Appendix B

Sample IEP Team Action Plan Letter

DATE

Dear Team Members,

Team Meetings are scheduled throughout the school year to provide us an opportunity to discuss and monitor **STUDENT'S NAME** inclusive educational program. Please put the following dates on your calendar. You are a valuable member of the team, and I hope that you can attend the meetings. If you have any questions, please call me at **PHONE NUMBER** or email me at **EMAIL ADDRESS**.

All team meetings will be in Room 1. The team members include: **THE STUDENT, PARENTS, GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHER, INSTRUCTIONAL ASSISTANT(S), SPEECH AND LANGUAGE PATHOLOGIST, OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST, ADAPTIVE PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER, SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST, PRINCIPAL, and SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER**.

DATES
DATES
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DATES

Thank you,

NAME, Special Education Teacher/Inclusion Specialist

Cc: all team members