

Preparing New Special Education Teachers to Facilitate Collaboration in the Individualized Education Program Process Through Mini-Conferencing

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Abstract

It is no question that preparing teachers to work with the many facets involved in special education is a daunting task. Upon entering the classroom on the first day, special education teachers are expected to be prepared (Sayeski, 2015) when presented with numerous responsibilities (Collins, Sweigart, Landrum, & Cook, (2017), including parent collaboration and involvement in the individualized education plan (IEP) process. This article offers a strategy, mini-conferencing, for training novice special education teachers to foster the increased participation of parents in IEP meetings. Recommendations for best practice used to establish the mini-conference and a step-by-step guide for implementation are discussed.

Keywords: *novice special educators, parent participation, individual education process, collaboration*

Introduction

In recent years, the quality of teacher preparation has received increased national attention, with many states increasing accountability of teacher preparation programs (Fuchs, Fahsl, & James, 2017). One reason for this is that high rates of beginning special education teachers report feeling ‘*underprepared*’ to effectively handle the many facets of the job thrown at them. Because there is such a high rate of teacher turnover in special education in

the first years, beginning special education teachers need a variety of supports to develop skills to persist in the teaching profession (Collins, Sweigart, Landrum, & Cook, (2017, p. 214). All too often though, one skill that graduating teacher candidates lack are the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and confidence necessary for building collaborative relationships with parents (Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008). While many teacher preparation programs acknowledge the importance of parent involvement, frequently the preparation and training that teacher candidates receive in these programs falls short of what is needed to actually foster collaboration and partnership with parents (Casper, Lopez, Chi, & Weiss, 2011; Dotger & Bennett, 2010; Flanigan, 2005; Giallourakis, Pretti-Frintczak, & Cook, 2005; Murray, Handside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009).

Family Collaboration in Special Education

Family involvement is known to be one of the greatest predictors of growth and well being for students with disabilities; collaboration and partnerships with families has shown significant benefits for students with disabilities across ages and grade levels (Colarusso & O'Rourke, 2007; Resch et al., 2010). Cook and Friend (2010) define collaboration as "the style professionals select to employ based on mutual goals; shared responsibility for key divisions; shared accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and the development of trust, respect, and sense of community" (p. 3). Parent/family collaboration is vital because parents are the primary advocates, speaking for their children regarding what services and supports are suitable to address their specific needs and have been critical factors for predicting successful student outcomes (Lo, 2012; McCoach et al., 2010).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) was specifically designed to recognize the importance of parent/family involvement, and mandated that schools take measures to include parents in the special education process. Research indicates however, that although the IEP is the foundation for the provision of special education services and is perhaps the most pivotal point in the provision of services, parental perceptions of IEP meetings are not always positive. For example, families report feeling that participation in this process leaves them feeling confused (Stoner et al., 2005), as though they had been treated badly by educators (Fish, 2006), and as passive receivers of information whose primary role was to answer questions (Childre & Chambers, 2005). Families also report feeling as though they have limited power in decision-making, they lack sufficient opportunity to fully participate in their child's education, and feel alienated when the IEP team emphasizes student needs rather than strengths (Resch et al., 2010). As a result, parents may feel anxious or stressed when attending IEP meetings (McNulty, Prosser, & Moody, 2010). While it is vital that educators are in communication with parents throughout the entirety of the school year, meetings in which their child's IEP is designed and/or reviewed, offer parents crucial opportunities to provide direct suggestions and input that could positively impact their child's education. Learning how to overcome obstacles when creating a collaborative environment includes developing skills and strategies conducive to open lines of communication.

Variables Impacting Parental Involvement in the IEP Process

Fish (2006) investigated parental perceptions regarding what schools could do to improve the IEP process. Findings from this study indicated that educators should: a) make the meetings more democratic so parents feel they are equal contributors; b) be open to parental input regarding placement, discipline, and instruction; c) be friendly; valuing and listening to parental input; d) be flexible and more willing to adjust to student needs; and, e) educate parents about the IEP process. In a follow-up study, Fish (2008) concluded that parents felt as though educators could improve the IEP process by allowing sufficient time

for the meetings, creating a welcoming environment, encouraging parents to bring an advocate familiar with the IEP process, using common terms instead of jargon to lessen confusion, refraining from completing IEP forms in advance of parental input, involving parents in writing the goals and objectives, and, providing parents with a copy of the IEP objectives prior to the meeting to allow time for review. Similarly, Simon (2006) suggested providing IEP forms in advance, thus prompting parents to think about issues that will be discussed at the IEP meeting to enhance parents' sense of ownership and foster increased communication both during and after the meeting. Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008) also note that educators must avoid generalizations and characterizations that insinuate a child be defined by his or her disabilities. Rather, education personnel should share their knowledge of the child as an individual with unique interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

As a roadmap to special education services, the IEP process is essential in planning appropriate instruction for students with disabilities and is intended to guide the integration of general and special education. The IEP meeting is designed to provide an open line of communication where parents and professionals discuss and exchange information to jointly create a plan that contains what will be of best interest for the child. However, it is asserted that each individual IEP team has its own culture (i.e., the attitudes and beliefs that are valued by a given team) that dictates the dynamics of the IEP meeting (Dabkowski, 2004).

IEP teams may demonstrate culture in the following ways: the procedures by which members share information, who speaks at the meeting, how influential members are in making decisions, the specific recommendations that various members make during the meeting, and the voiced beliefs regarding instructional strategies and their effectiveness. Further, team cultures can determine whether parents are encouraged to participate throughout the meeting or are merely asked to participate at the end (Dabkowski, 2004). Some challenges faced by IEP teams may include: frustration by perceptions of inequality among team members, unfamiliarity with school and/or legal procedures, and/or not understanding special education terminology or jargon (Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Jivanjee, Kmzich, Friesen, & Robinson, 2007). Perhaps exacerbating these issues is the fact that teachers and other professionals see each other every day and develop a form of intimacy, while parents may not always have this luxury. This, in turn, can cause professionals to read parental nonparticipation as apathy or a lack of appreciation.

The tone of the IEP meeting and the familiarity of parents with the procedures of IEP meetings and the IEP process can also have a tremendous impact on meeting outcomes and the parent-school relationship. Parents who feel respected and are considered as equal partners are more likely to continue to participate throughout their child's academic career (Lo, 2012). Furthermore, when parents see themselves, their children, and team members actively planning for the future by utilizing student centered planning, dynamics shift from general conversation to in-depth communication about specific issues and a higher level of satisfaction with the planning process occurs (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engles, 2010).

New Special Education Teachers Preparedness to Conduct A Mini-Conference

Research indicates that the feelings of confusion and apprehension that parents often experience may be due to a lack of preparedness and experience, which often results in a lack of active participation in meetings (Fish, 2006, 2008). Parental anxiety can be minimized when parents are prepared and collect needed information in advance (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008).

Table 1. Mini-conference script that may be used by the special education teacher when communicating to parents during the mini-conference meeting

Pre-Meeting	<i>Is an interpreter/translator needed?</i> <i>Yes</i> <i>No</i>
1.	Thank you for taking time to meet with me briefly today. Your input is extremely important to the upcoming IEP meeting and one of the things I will do today is to try to help you feel comfortable in participating in that meeting. To accomplish this, we will practice coming up with questions that you might ask in the formal IEP meeting.
2.	<p>What we are going to do today is discuss some of the things that we will talk about in your child's formal Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. The things we discuss today are just to help us get a better understanding of the IEP process and begin coming up with ideas about how to best help your child. This is only the <i>first</i> attempt to get some ideas down on paper, and the formal IEP will be developed when the entire IEP team can contribute to the decision-making process. <i>(Ask parent if they have any questions or need clarification. Wait for parent response and answer any questions.)</i></p> <p>In addition to this purpose for today's mini-conference, do you have any other items you would like to discuss? <i>(teacher makes notes of any additional items to discuss between steps 16 and 1 of the script)</i></p>
3.	The purpose for having the IEP meeting is to look at how your child is performing in school, what additional things we can do to help your child do better in school, and to develop an individual education plan (IEP) for your child.
4.	Data indicates your child's present levels of performance are: <i>(show parents examples of student performance)</i>
5.	What is one question you have about your child's performance? <i>(Wait for parent response and answer any questions)</i>
6.	Now we are going to look at possible goals and objectives for _____ IEP. Goals are broad statements about what your child needs help with (example: subtraction) and objectives are more specific statements about exactly what your child needs to learn (example: borrowing when subtracting) in order to correctly perform the bigger goal (subtraction).
7.	<p><i>(To be completed for an annual IEP meeting only)</i></p> <p>Because the data indicates your child is able to do the above things independently, we should consider mastering the following goals/objectives on your child's current IEP: <i>(can write on parent form and show parents proposed goals/objectives from a computerized version).</i></p>
8.	<p><i>(To be completed for an annual IEP meeting only)</i></p> <p>Because the data indicates your child has not yet mastered everyone on their current IEP, we should consider rewriting and continuing the following goals/objectives on your child's IEP <i>(can write on parent form and show parents proposed goals/objectives from a computerized version).</i></p>

9.	For the coming year, here are some possibilities for goals and objectives that might work for _____ (can write on parent form and show parents proposed goals/objectives from a computerized version).
10.	What comments or suggestions would you like to make at this point? Are there any transition needs we need to think about as we draft _____ educational plan? Wait for parent response and answer any questions/address any concerns.
11.	What changes would you like to see? What other ideas do you have to make the IEP even better suited to meet the needs of _____? Wait for parent response and answer any questions.
12.	There are a variety of educational settings in which students can receive instruction (explain all educational options; regular education, resource, content mastery, life skills, etc.)
13.	Ask me a question about the different educational settings. Wait for parent response and answer any questions.
14.	For the coming year, here are some possibilities for educational environments that might work for _____.
15.	Based on what you know of _____, do you feel that this would be the best choice for him/her? Wait for parent response and answer any questions.
16.	What other questions do you have about the IEP process? Do you have any questions about the IEP meeting; what will happen, who will be there, etc.? Wait for parent response and answer any questions.
17.	I want to thank you for meeting with me today. It is important to me that you understand how valuable you are to the IEP process. We are all a team working to develop the best plan to help your child. Please do not hesitate to ask questions or make suggestions at the IEP meeting. We want to work together to make the best decisions for your child. (If parents suggest something that you aren't comfortable with say, "That is certainly a possibility that the team should discuss. Please bring it up when we are all there to talk about it".)

Table 2. Sample completed mini-conference parent form discussing individualized areas for consideration and pertinent information regarding a child's educational plan

Areas for Consideration	Information Pertinent to Sally's Educational Plan
<p>___Sally's___ present levels of performance</p> <p>Sally is completing 3rd grade and we are planning for 4th grade.</p>	<p>Sally can successfully do each of these in 9 out of 10 trials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiply 3 digits by 1 digit • divide 3 digits by 1 digit • read 80 words correct per minute on a 3rd grade passage • identify the setting of a passage
<p><i>(To be completed for an annual IEP meeting only; can reference printed IEP document)</i></p> <p>Because data demonstrates that ___ Sally ___ is able to do the above things independently, we should consider mastering the following goals/objectives on your child's current IEP:</p>	<p>Goal 1: Sally will correctly identify the setting of a selected passage in 9 out of 10 trials.</p> <p>Goal 3: Sally will correctly multiply and divide 3 digits by 1 digit in 9 out of 10 trials.</p>
<p><i>(To be completed for an annual IEP meeting only; can reference printed IEP document)</i></p> <p>Because the data indicates that ___ Sally ___ has not yet mastered everyone on their current IEP, we should consider rewriting and continuing the following goals/objectives on your child's IEP.</p>	<p>Goal 2: When given a 3rd grade passage, Sally will read 100 words correct per minute in 9 out of 10 trials.</p> <p>Goal 4: Sally will correctly add and subtract fractions with like denominators in 9 out of 10 trials.</p> <p>Goal 5: Sally will correctly complete a summary of a selected passage in 9 out of 10 trials.</p>
<p>For the coming year, here are some possibilities for goals and objectives that might work for _ Sally_.</p>	<p>After instruction, Sally will correctly multiply and divide 2 digits by 2 digits in 9 out of 10 trials.</p> <p>After instruction, Sally will correctly add and subtract fractions with like and unlike denominators in 9 out of 10 trials.</p> <p>When given a 3rd grade passage, Sally will read 100 words correct per minute in 9 out of 10 trials.</p> <p>After strategy instruction, Sally will correctly summarize a passage on 3rd grade level in 9 out of 10 trials.</p>
<p>For the coming year, here are some possibilities for educational environments that might work for _ Sally_.</p>	<p>Inclusion support, via a special educator or paraprofessional, in general education for math, science, and social studies;</p> <p>Resource reading/language arts pullout 45 minutes daily.</p>

As created, the mini-conference was intended to be a short (20-30 minutes), less formal meeting than a parent-teacher conference that might address a variety of purposes and occur between one to three weeks in advance of the IEP meeting. If the student's parents have limited English proficiency, the special education teacher should arrange for an interpreter to be present at the mini-conference. Additionally, to further plan for the needs of

culturally diverse parents and students, teachers can refer to the strategies provided by Williams, Jones, and Williams (2015) as they plan for teacher-parent communications in the mini-conference. Additionally, the use of electronic mediums can result in increased flexibility for members to attend the mini-conference and increase positive parent communication (Lavay, Sakai, Ortiz, & Roth, 2015; Vannest, Burke, Payne, Davis, & Soares, 2011; Williams, Noell, Jones, & Gansle, 2012;). Thus, to be cognizant of the time constraints involved for teachers and parents alike as well as recent research validating the use of electronic mediums, the mini-conference could be conducted via Skype, Zoom, or via smartphone video calls, provided the parents and staff alike have access to such technology. If the parents or staff does not have access or knowledge of technology, the mini-conference could be held via a phone call as well.

Novice teachers should be knowledgeable about how to conduct a mini-conference and how to utilize it with all parents of students receiving special education services. The mini-conference should allow for a structure in which parents are informed of the purpose for the mini-conference and to provide parents an opportunity have terms explained that will be used in the actual IEP meeting, as well as have the opportunity to practice asking pertinent questions. begin with positive comments thanking them for their involvement and focusing on the student's progress, then moving into statements regarding areas in which improvement is needed. It is likely that the novice special education teacher will need to consult the general education teacher(s) to solicit their input on present levels of student performance for initial IEPs or student performance on existing IEP goals.

IEP procedures and contents should also be discussed. This conveys to parents that the school (and by association, the IEP team) is open, demonstrates trust and respect, and fosters ongoing two-way communication about the child's strengths and needs. Specifically, the mini-conference should inform parents regarding their child's progress on previously established IEP goals and objectives (for annual IEP meetings), discuss possible new goals and objectives for the IEP, and help parents understand that their contributions are both important and valued. Finally, the mini-conference should begin and conclude with a positive statement regarding the importance of parental involvement in the educational process, thanking the parents for their attendance and participation.

Perhaps most importantly, instruction in the procedures of the mini-conference should clearly highlight the need to communicate to the parent that the mini-conference is a process, rather than a product. That is, all final decisions will be made during the IEP meeting, and the mini-conference is merely an avenue for brainstorming and facilitating the productivity of that meeting. As the special educator and parent are both required members of the IEP team, they should also both be in attendance at the formal IEP meeting. While there will, of course, be other participants at the IEP meeting, it should merely allow for further input on the items discussed initially at the mini-conference. What is more, no discussions held as a part of the mini-conference would have any legal implications for the IEP process, and a parent that wishes to utilize the services of a parent advocate or legal representative would do so at the formal IEP meeting.

A graphic representation of the key elements of the mini-conference is provided to further conceptualize the strategy and guide discussion (see Figure 1). In addition, a potential script, with a corresponding sample parent form, is included as a possible example for implementation (see Tables 1 and 2). Although it is not essential that teachers follow the sample script to have a successful mini-conference, if utilized, the parent form and teacher script may be used in conjunction with each other. To employ the provided forms, parents should be given a student-specific completed parent form for their reference, and teachers should conduct the mini-conference from the script corresponding to the items on the parent

form. In order to cover the contents of the completed parent form with the student's parents, the special education teacher should read from the teacher script that corresponds to the parent form. It should also be clearly explained to all parents that the mini-conference is simply a pre-meeting and that the IEP team would make all final decisions during the IEP meeting. Additionally, if school personnel wish to document the efficacy of the mini-conference on parent involvement in the IEP process, they may utilize the surveys for parents and professionals created and implemented by Jones and Gansle (2010) at the conclusion of the formal IEP meetings.

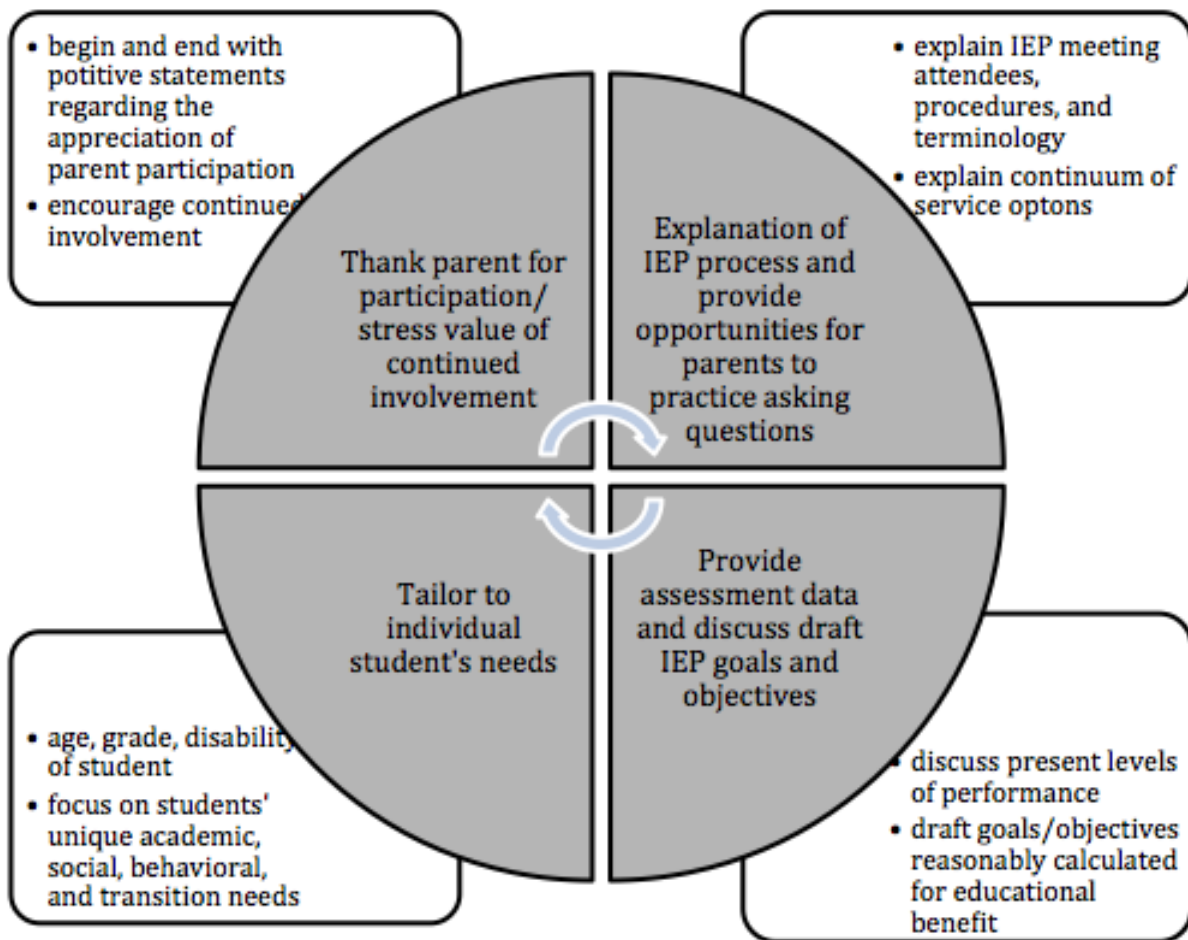


Figure 1. Critical components of pre-IEP planning with parents

Conclusion

Parental participation in a child's education is positively related to student success and is mandated by IDEA; however, parents report not being able to participate fully in IEP meetings (Resch et al., 2010). The present authors offered a strategy aimed at how novice teachers could facilitate and foster increased participation of parents in IEP meetings. Of course, individual IEP teams must use good judgment as to the format for implementation due to variables such as access and knowledge of technology, the needs of culturally and

linguistically diverse students and parents, and individual families' level of special education familiarity and/or experience.

When implemented as indicated, the mini-conferencing procedures have been shown to increase educators' perceptions of parental involvement (Jones & Gansle, 2010), serving to establish and maintain relationships built on trust between parents and educators. Furthermore, because parents who feel respected and are considered as equal partners are more likely to continue to participate throughout their child's academic career (Lo, 2012), it is possible that the mini-conferencing procedure will not only impact change for the present IEP meeting, but for future interactions as well. Through efforts to promote collaboration, teachers can create opportunities for and identify family perceptions of school interactions to create opportunities for learning; both essential components of family-centered practices in regards to special education and related services (Epley, Summers, & Turnbull, 2011).

The process of building school-family partnerships is dynamic and collaboration involves parents and teachers sharing resources, responsibilities, and decision-making roles in an effort to comprehensively address the needs of the whole child (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Partnerships with parents enhance the planning and implementation of the goals and objectives of students' IEPs (Squires, 2001), therefore, teacher preparation programs can impact the nature of home-school collaboration when including reflective and intentional teaching practices enhancing teachers' willingness to develop school-community collaboration (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). In fact, Crais et al. (2004) found that graduates from teacher preparation programs that provided explicit school-community collaboration and partnership experiences were better prepared to communicate with parents and families with disabilities. Through efforts to promote collaboration such as mini-conferencing, novice special education teachers can learn early in a teacher preparation program about how to create opportunities for and identify family perceptions of school interactions to create opportunities for learning; both essential components of family-centered practices in regards to special education and related services (Epley, Summers, & Turnbull, 2011).

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