

An Intentionally Inviting Individualized Educational Program Meeting: It can happen!

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Abstract

Anyone who has attended an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting for a student with special needs knows that this gathering of individuals has the potential to be extremely contentious and adversarial if not handled effectively. Often parents become overwhelmed by terminology that is foreign to them and may feel as though the only comments they hear about their child's educational experiences are negative. By contrast, teachers and service providers too often approach these meetings as a fait accompli, whereby a plan for services and placement decision has been pre-determined, which is in sharp contrast to the mandated approach requiring the meeting to be a work in progress, developed by a team effort, and valuing the parents as active team members. Invitational Education theory encourages a more dependable stance. This article describes the benefits of applying Invitational Education theory to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting.

Introduction

The International Alliance for Invitational Education (IAIE) starfish analogy (Purkey & Novak, 2016) lends itself perfectly to safeguarding the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting as a welcoming and positive experience for all participants. Invitational Education theory advocates for an emphasis upon programs, policies, peoples, processes and places “to transform the fundamental culture by centering all action on intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust” (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p.18). According to Purkey and Novak, “Invitational Education begins and ends with people” (2016, p. 20). In the case of an IEP meeting, IDEA (2004) mandates the stakeholder team comprised of parents/guardians, students, special educators, general educators, related service providers, and administrators, to work together to provide the best possible educational program for the student receiving services.

Research suggests that parent perceptions of welcoming or inviting experiences during the IEP process, including the classification meetings, is far from welcoming or inviting (Cheatham, et. al, 2012). In a review of 10 studies relating to parental perception of the IEP process, only one reported positive parental experiences (Reiman, Beck, Coppola & Engiles, 2010). The remaining reviewed studies found that the foundation for positive and inviting IEP meetings must begin with parent inclusion in every step of the evaluation and classification process. “Educators should refrain from predetermining IEP decisions, completing IEP forms without family input, and

excluding families when writing goals and objectives” (Fish, 2008, p. 13). Invitational Education theory applied to IEP team interactions can mitigate obstacles that limit family involvement due to the locus of control in educational planning and facilitation being firmly with the professionals (Childre & Chambers, 2005).

Theoretical Framework

People

All participants at the IEP meeting are important and worthy of respect, even when participants do not agree with one another. As cited in Purkey, Schmidt, and Novak (2010, p. 10), “the absence of conflict is death” (Fullan, 2001). Each participant is a valued team member and has something worthy to contribute to the goal of providing the most appropriate educational programming and related services for the student with special needs. From the parents’ perspective, their contribution comes in the form of making appropriate parenting decisions for their child and being their child’s strongest advocate. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) mandates the involvement of parents throughout the IEP process. Parental active involvement was shown to be beneficial for their children’s receipt of services (Lo, 2012). As an IDEA mandate, Yell, Katsayannis, Ennis, and Losinski (2013) emphasize that if attempts to actively involve parents are not documented by the school, a due process hearing could determine that the student was denied a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). When a school implements invitational education practices in the pursuit of following legal protocol, it could establish the an intentionally inviting platform that supports the mindset needed to provide quality educational planning and programming for students with special needs (Hansen & Morrow, 2012). For the teachers, evaluators, and administrators, participating in the IEP process, the change in mindset should exhibit a “beneficial presence” (Purkey, Schmidt, & Novak, 2010, p. 9) in the lives of students with disabilities, their parents and other IEP team members.

Places

When coordinating details for an upcoming IEP meeting, one of the requirements must be “to ensure that IEP meetings are scheduled at a mutually agreeable time and place, which can include holding meetings by conference calls or via the Internet” (Yell, Katsayannis, Ennis, & Losinski, 2013, p. 59). While not required by law, when a parent cannot come to a meeting during the school day, the most intentionally inviting approach would be to either hold the meeting after school hours, by conference call, or through an internet session such as Zoom, FaceTime, or Skype. Technology has developed several programs that provide flexibility for identifying convenient dates and times for scheduling the meeting when the parent has access to a connected device. By providing such an opportunity, parents are given the respect to participate based on a time and place that welcomes their diverse schedules to optimize their active participation.

The IEP meeting environment can be intentionally inviting or intentionally disinviting, depending on the effort or lack thereof put forth by the educational stakeholders hosting the meeting. Thus, the place either positively or negatively set the tone for the IEP meeting before it begins. A meeting can occur in the most up to date place with video equipment, computers for every participant, and new furniture. Yet, it still can be intentionally disinviting if other team members present themselves in the meeting room in a manner that makes the student’s parents feel welcome. When the parents are strategically seated across the table from the school’s team members, opposing sides, rather than a group working together for the child’s best interests, becomes a natural perception (Varvisotis, Matyo-Cepero, & Ziebarth-Bovill, 2016). Conversely, a meeting

can take place in an older, more outdated facility, yet still be intentionally inviting. When the educational members of the IEP team seeks to meet when it is most convenient for parents, when parents are greeted with a smile and a warm handshake, when all meeting participants are introduced before the start of the meeting, and when the case manager arranges to sit next to the parents, then the atmosphere of the IEP meeting place can be considerably more positive and inviting for success (Varvisotis, Matyo-Cepero, & Ziebarth-Bovill, 2016).

Policies

IDEA (2004) mandates required components of an IEP meeting. These specific requirements include:

- “a) providing prior written notice of IEP meeting to parents
- b) adhering to state-mandated timelines
- c) involving a student’s parents in education decision making
- d) conducting complete and individualized evaluations
- e) ensuring that all the necessary team members attend IEP meetings
- f) including appropriate content in the IEP, and
- g) ensuring that the IEP is implemented as written” (Yell, 2016, p.230).

Today, there are many single-parent homes and many two-parent homes whereby parents both hold multiple jobs to meet their family’s needs.. A single-parent family with the father as the sole caretaker, may be especially vulnerable to feeling overwhelmed, a lack of partnership with the school or IEP team, which exacerbates conflicts (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). An intentionally disinviting way to comply with IDEA policies would be simply mailing a letter stating when and where the meeting is to be held not following up in any way. If the letter is not delivered to the correct address, or if the parent subsequently cannot attend the meeting, an intentionally disinviting mindset could misinterpret absence as a lack of parental interest or involvement. By contrast, an intentionally inviting mindset makes a concerted effort to align IEP policies with the parent’s reality.

Programs

Once it has been determined that a student is eligible for special education and related services, the team must work together to arrange and implement the best possible educational program to meet that student’s needs and optimize educational success. Too frequently, budget concerns influence allocation of services and educational programs. It is intentionally disinviting and potentially illegal for educational stakeholders of an IEP team to predetermine a student’s classification category, service provision, and educational placement, before the IEP meeting (Yell, Katsiyannis, Ennis, & Losinski, 2013).

IDEA (2004) requires development of educational programs specifically crafted to meet the needs of students who are eligible for special education and related services, including giftedness. IEP team stakeholders have become increasingly educated about the many techniques, strategies, technologies, and accommodations, that are available and accessible to best serve students’ with disabilities. Invitational Education theory utilized during the IEP process and meeting has the potential to create an invaluable, positive experience, which ultimately optimizes success for the student. Program options should be openly shared with the parents and the rationale for preferences for a specific program collaboratively discussed with the parents. An intentionally inviting mindset seeks to fully explain and patiently discuss a program’s details with the parent. Whenever

the parent is unsure about a recommendation, the opportunity to be enlightened must be afforded the parent.

Processes

The Starfish Analogy of Invitational Education (Purkey & Novak, 2016) is apropos for IEP meetings. Through an intentionally inviting mindset, the IEP process brings together people, places, policies, and programs to create an effective means by which educational and parent stakeholders can collectively develop the foundation for meeting the needs of the child with a disability. More than satisfying the legal mandates required by an IEP meeting, an IEP meetings based on invitational education theory positively informs the child and parents of their sense of potential (Redford, 2015). An IEP meeting based on invitational education theory (Purkey & Novak, 2016) intentionally invites all stakeholders to actively contribute to the development of the IEP. The invitational education process thereby empowers collaborative formulation, implementation, and the evaluation of the student's progress.

Suggestions

There are many ways to make an IEP meeting more intentionally inviting. Many of these best practices are rooted in the IDEA mandates to increase active parental involvement in the IEP process. While parents must be provided a list of names and job titles of the school staff participating in the meeting, ask all educational stakeholders to wear names tags or provide names tents at each participant's seat. Ensure water and tissues are available, respective that an IEP meeting can be very emotional for parents. When upset, offer the opportunity to take a break. Avoid jargon! However, because special education uses many acronyms, be sure the required handbook of parents' rights includes an appendix that includes a list of commonly used acronyms and their meanings. If the state-distributed parents' rights handbook does not include a glossary and acronym list, develop one for your school/district. Following the IEP meeting, send the parents an evaluation survey in the parent's preferred mode of communication (digital or hardcopy) eliciting the parents' perception of the educational stakeholder's level of professionalism, school environment, hospitality, flexibility of meeting time, etc. Whenever, as is a right, the student plans to attend the IEP meeting, have "fidget devices" or stress-relieving objects to help aid the student's participation.

Conclusions

Even an invitational teacher who believes "the school's programs work for the benefit of everyone and that they encourage active engagement" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 21) must create strategies or programs to help children with special needs in their studies. The 5 P's discussed above "provide a language for strategic thinking. Analyzing and improving each of the 5 P's within a framework of intentionality, care, optimism, respect, and trust (I-CORT) systemically transform the whole school" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 22). , From the time a child is initially referred for evaluation through the IEP team meeting to determine eligibility and create the IEP, your school and its IEP team may need to be restructured (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Implementing invitational education theory into this reform efforts will create levels of functioning based on a "dependable stance, where school personnel understand the dynamics of an inviting relationship, increases the likelihood that a cordial summons will be accepted, and acted upon" (Purkey & Novak, 2016, p. 24).

The point of an IEP meeting that implements invitational education theory is not to create an environment where there is a “warm and fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likeable” (Noddings, 1995, p. 2). Rather, the value is derived from each participant interacting as an equal member of the team, whereby the production of caring, competent, loving and lovable people demonstrating respect for the human talents, becomes the educational goal (Noddings, 1995). Any IEP meeting that implements invitational education theory actively seeks to involve all participants in the discussion. In doing so, educational stakeholders satisfy IDEA (2004) mandates designed to benefit the children we serve while intentionally inviting collaborative discussions that generate and prioritize goals that transform practice based on a new vision for student success (Dabkowski, 2004).

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