Resources for Involving Students in Their IEP Process

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An Article Published in

TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus

Volume 3, Issue 4, March 2007

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Abstract

Research continues to document the lack of widespread classroom implementation of self-determination instruction. One reason given for why self-determination skills are not being taught is the lack of readily available and affordable instructional resources. The IEP process is one vehicle that all teachers can use to teach self-determination. Research has demonstrated that students with disabilities can participate in each stage, including planning, drafting, meeting to revise the draft, and implementing the plan. This article provides an overview of student involvement in the IEP process and describes "no-cost" resources that teachers can use to involve their students in the IEP process.

Keywords

individualized education program, IEP, self determination, student participation

Acknowledgments:
Support for this research was provided in part by Grant No. H324R030029 from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, awarded to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or the policy of the Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

SUGGESTED CITATION:
Uphold, N.M., Walker, A.R., & West, D.W. (2007). Resources for involving students in their IEP process. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus,* 3(4) Article 1. Retrieved [date] from http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol3/iss4/art1

- Are your students involved in their IEP process?
- Would you like to increase your students' involvement in their IEP process?
- Do you know that resources are available to help you facilitate your students' involvement?

This article provides an overview of the various ways that students can become more involved in their own IEP process and describes "no-cost" resources that teachers can use to help involve their students in the process.

Ways Students Can Be Involved in the IEP Process

The IEP process can be divided into four stages, including planning, drafting, meeting to revise the draft, and implementing the plan (Konrad & Test, 2004). Research has demonstrated that students with disabilities can participate in each of these stages. For a comprehensive review of the literature on student involvement in the IEP process, see Test et al. (2004).

Planning. Planning is the first stage of the IEP process and includes determining strengths and needs, establishing goals, and organizing materials for the meeting. For example, Cross, Cooke, Wood, and Test (1999) evaluated the effects of two commercially available curricula, *The McGill Action Planning System* and the Choosing Employment Goals strand of *ChoiceMaker*, on student goal selection. Results indicated high school students increased their ability to choose and express goals. Next, using *TAKE CHARGE for the Future*, students became more involved in transition planning activities by initiating and participating in discussions with other participants at their IEP meetings (Powers, Turner, Westwood, Matuszewski, Wilson, & Phillips, 2001).

Drafting. Students have also been involved in the second stage by learning to draft their own IEP. For example, Konrad and Test (2004) evaluated the effects of IEP awareness instruction on students' ability to complete an IEP template. This template taught students to write drafts of their IEP in three sections, (a) vision statement/strengths, (b) needs/goals, and (c) services/least restrictive environment

Meeting. Meeting to revise the plan is the third stage and is completed at the IEP meeting. Using a variety of techniques, students have been able to participate in the IEP meeting as contributors, participants, and leaders. For example, using an IEP participation strategy, called "I Plan" (an early version of *The Self-Advocacy Strategy*), high school students increased their verbal contributions, including identifying learning strengths, weaknesses, and goals, at IEP conferences (Van Reusen, & Bos, 1994; Van Reusen, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1989). In the first step, "Inventory," students completed inventory sheets listing strengths and weaknesses, goals and interests, and choices for learning. The second step, "Provide your inventory information," prepared students for participation in their IEP conferences. The third step, "Listen and respond," taught students to listen to others and answer questions appropriately during their meeting. Step four, "Ask questions," had students ask questions in order to collect information. The final step, "Name your goals," provided students with the opportunity to state their goals for their IEP. *The Self-Advocacy Strategy* has also been used with middle school students to prepare them for their IEP meeting (Test & Neale, 2004).

A second intervention package, the *Self-Directed IEP,* has been used to teach middle school students to increase student

participation in mock and real IEP meetings (Allen, Smith, Test, Flowers, & Wood, 2001). Snyder and Shapiro (1997) also used the *Self-Directed IEP* to teach three high school students with serious emotional disturbance to lead portions of their IEP meetings. A third technique that has been used to teach students to lead their meetings is the *Student-Led IEPS: A Guide for Student Involvement* (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, & Stillerman, 2002). In this study, students were taught about understanding their disability, legal rights to an education, learning strengths and weaknesses, planning for post-school activities, and knowing their current level of performance and goals. After instruction, these high school students were able to lead parts of their IEP meeting including strengths, needs, and concerns.

Implementing the plan. The final stage that students can be involved in is implementing their IEP. For example, German, Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2000) evaluated the effects of *Take Action* on the goal attainment (e.g., having a bus pass, locating five items at the supermarket, and not interrupting a conversation) of high school students. *Take Action* consists of four steps: plan, act, evaluate, and adjust. Students chose daily goals and were taught how to set a strategy to reach their goals, decide on support they would need to meet goals, evaluate their progress toward goal attainment, and adjust their goal based on their evaluation. All students attained their daily goals after intervention.

Promoting Self-Determination

While research indicates students can take an active role in each stage of their IEP process (Test et al., 2004), there continues to be a gap between what research says is possible and widespread classroom implementation of self-determination instruction. For example, although several state and national surveys have indicated that professionals view teaching self-determination skills as important (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2000; Thoma, Baker, & Saddler, 2002; Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, 2004), findings also indicate that self-determination instruction is not taking place (Wehmeyer et al., 2000; Mason, Field, et al., 2004; Test et al., 2004). One reason why self-determination skills are not being taught is the lack of readily available and affordable instructional resources (Wehmeyer et al., 2000; Test et al., 2004). For example, in their national survey of teachers' perceptions of the benefits of self-determination, Wehmeyer et al. (2000) found teachers were not aware of existing self-determination instructional materials. Next, Thoma, Nathanson, Baker, and Tamura (2002) found in their survey of special education teachers that fewer than 10% of teachers surveyed had heard of the most commonly-used person-centered planning methods.

To help teachers find their way through the many articles and resources on teaching self-determination Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, and Algozzine (2001) provided a map with two pathways. The first path led to a conceptual understanding of self-determination and its components (see Table 1: Conceptual Resources). The second path led to resources for designing instruction.

Choosing self-determination instructional materials and curricula can be difficult because of the wide variety of available choices and differences between students. To help with this task, Test et al. (2000) devised a set of questions to ask when determining which curricula to use. These include asking about intended audiences, relationship of skills taught to students' needs, prerequisite

Table 1. Conceptual Resources

Conceptual Resources on Self-Determination

According to Browder et al. (2001), a teachers' role in developing students' self-determination skills begins with their own understanding of the concept and their ability to use various resources that encompass self-determination in an educational program. A teacher's understanding of self-determination allows them to learn how they can give students the confidence to take greater control over their lives (Abery, 1994; Doll, Sands, Wehmeyer, & Palmer, 1996; Wehmeyer, 1992). Some resources that teachers can use to learn more about self-determination include Browder et al. (2001), Field et al. (1998), and Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998).

Recently, Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, and Eddy (2005) suggested a conceptual framework for self-advocacy. Since the term self-advocacy is often used interchangeably, and in conjunction with self-determination (Field, 1996), and it is a valuable skill needed to actively participate in the IEP process, we offer a brief summary of the self-advocacy conceptual framework here. The components of this framework include knowledge of self (e.g, strengths, preferences, and goals), knowledge of rights (e.g., educational, personal, and human service), communication (e.g., assertiveness, use of assistive technology, and articulation), and leadership (e.g., advocating for others or for causes, knowledge of resources, and political action) and may serve as a guide for teachers when building instruction. By having clear definitions of the four components of self-determination and self-advocacy, teachers can design instruction and choose curricula that match their students' specific needs.

skills needed, materials provided, usability of lesson plans, materials field-tested, and time and financial obligations. These questions can be used to choose all forms of self-determination materials, not only curricula.

In the following section, we provide information on additional, "no-cost" resources for teachers to use to assist their students in becoming more involved in their IEP process. As you review each one, ask yourself the questions presented by Test et al. (2000) in determining which resources would be most beneficial for your students. Resources are categorized by three of the four stages of the IEP process, planning, drafting, and meeting to revise the draft. See Table 2 for details about how to obtain more information about each resource.

Planning. *Who makes the choices? Arizona's student-led IEP teacher toolkit* (InterAct, n.d) is a guide for teachers to use to assist students in learning about their IEPs, disabilities, goals for school and the future, and modifications and accommodations needed to help reach these goals. This toolkit includes sample lesson plans and forms.

Can I go to the IEP Meeting? (Kidder, 1994). This provides a brief description of what students' should expect at their IEP meeting and how the students should prepare

Table 2. Resources for Involving Students in their IEP process

Resource	Contact Information	IEP Stage	Suggested Grade Levels	Materials Included
Who makes the choices? Arizona's student-led IEP teacher toolkit	http://www.studentledieps.org/	Planning	All grades (provides sample modifications for grades and disability level)	▪ Lesson plans ▪ Forms and handouts ▪ Basic training guide for teachers
Can I go to the IEP meeting?	http://www.ldonline.org/article/6304	Planning	None suggested	▪ Questions students should ask themselves to learn more about their strengths
IEP Template	See Konrad, & Test, (2004).	Drafting	Middle school	▪ Worksheets for students to complete to assist with drafting their IEP
Helping students develop their IEPs: Technical assistance guide	http://www.nichcy.org/stuguid/asp	Drafting	Older students	▪ Student guide – learning about IEP and how to prepare for meeting ▪ Technical Assistance Guide – suggestions for teaching students about their IEP ▪ Audiotape – students talk about their experiences in leading their IEP meetings
IEP portfolio template	http://hawbaker.pls.iowapages.org/id2.html	Meeting to revise the plan	None suggested	▪ Worksheets for students to use as a guide to lead IEP meeting
How to help students lead their IEP meetings	See Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson (2004).	Meeting to revise the plan	None suggested	▪ Teacher's guide to instruct students how to participate in or lead their IEP meeting
Student-led IEPs: A guide for student involvement	www.ideapractices.org/bk/catalog2/iep.html	Meeting to revise the plan	Secondary	▪ Teacher's guide with suggestions for starting a program, helping students understand their IEP, assisting students to develop their IEPs and lead their IEP meetings, and assisting students with implementing their IEP.
Developing student competence in self-directed IEPs	See Torgerson, Miner, & Shen (2004).	Meeting to revise the plan	Secondary	▪ Teacher's guide to train students to be involved in their IEP meetings

for the meeting. A summary of questions students can ask themselves when preparing for their IEP meeting is also included.

Drafting. The *IEP Template* (Konrad & Test, 2004) was designed to help students write a draft of their IEP. The Template includes prompts to help students write a vision statement, present level of performance, needs, annual goals, objectives and measurement procedures, modifications and accommodations, and least restrictive environment. Students complete this template before their IEP meeting. The IEP is then finalized at the meeting using the information presented by the student from their template.

Another resource that can help students draft their IEP is *Helping Students Develop their IEPs: Technical Assistance Guide* (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY, 2002) which is a part of a series of technical assistance guides produced by NICHCY and is to be used along with the supplemental audiotape and guide titled *A Student's Guide to the IEP* (McGahee-Kovac, 2002). The NICHCY guide is a comprehensive tool for parents and teachers which includes step-by-step directions, worksheets, and appendices consisting of additional information and specific materials that can be used to encourage students to develop their IEPs. *A Student's Guide to the IEP* is used by students to develop his/her IEP. The guide describes what an IEP is, why a student should be involved with the IEP team, and how to assist with writing the IEP.

Meeting to revise the plan. The *IEP Portfolio Template* (Hawbaker, n.d.) provides statements for students to complete about the introduction to the IEP meeting, future goals, goals for the IEP, and accommodations and modifications. These statements include the names of the people who are at this meeting, places to live, this year's goal, and accommodations that work best. Students bring this template to the IEP meeting to guide the development of their IEP.

In addition to developing their IEP, students can take an active role at the IEP meeting. Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) describe a procedure to teach students to lead their IEP meetings. This procedure consists of six steps; describing an IEP, discussing assessment information, students contacting others for input on goals, review proposed goals, practice presentation, and additional discussion and practice. After instruction, students can participate in their meetings at varying levels depending on their ability and preparation.

Student-Led IEPs: A guide for student involvement (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001) is a guide to assist teachers as they implement student-led IEPs. The guide provides comprehensive information on starting a student-led IEP program, helping students understand the IEP, and ways of helping students develop the IEP as well as participate in the meeting. Templates include information about self, learning strengths and needs, accommodation needs, student information, and invitation to IEP meeting.

Finally, Torgerson, Miner, and Shen (2004) described the components of a training program designed to encourage students' involvement to take an active role at their IEP meetings. The training comprises four sessions and includes: (a) introduce the training, discuss the rationale for being involved in the IEP process, and complete a workbook called *It's My* Life; (b) watch a videotape of a simulated IEP meeting and discuss the 10-step guide from *The Self-Directed IEP*; (c) discuss social skills and role play an IEP meeting; and (d) videotape students role-playing an IEP meeting and discuss students' readiness for leading his/her IEP meeting. Each session of

the training is described as well as the activities, skills taught, and materials used to carry out the activities.

Summary

The resources described in this paper provide various ways to include students in their IEP process. Students can be involved in all aspects of their IEP, including planning, drafting, and participating in the meeting. All of the resources can be modified to meet the needs of individual students. We hope you find these resources valuable as you assist your students in becoming more involved in their IEP process and increasing their self-determination skills!

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