

Increasing Student Involvement in IEPs

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I learn best in a room that is not loud. I like when I work in a small group with the teacher. I like to watch videos. I do not like to read in science – I would rather do an experiment.

– Gabriel,¹ age 14, student with Autism

In September 2014, I transitioned from teaching general to special education students, and quickly noticed the gap between what students knew about themselves and what was written about them in their Individual Education Program (IEP). Aaron, a student in my inclusion² Language Arts class, was about to have his annual IEP meeting and first transition planning meeting. As an eighth grader, he was required to attend for the first time. I sat down with him one-on-one to complete the transition questionnaire and plan before his meeting. The first question, “What is your disability and how does it affect you?” stumped Aaron. He asked me what “disability” meant. I pulled up his IEP and showed him the cover page, with the label “Autism.” He had never heard the word, and I was totally unprepared to answer his question. As I stumbled trying to explain what Autism is, I realized the absurdity of asking a young man, about to enter high school, to tell me about his skills, interests, and abilities, his educational needs, and his future plans, when he did not even know what an IEP was or why he had one.

My experience with Aaron is not unique. In a 2006 study by Martin et al., 21.9% of special education students reported that no teacher had talked to them about their IEP meeting ahead of time. Of all those who participate in such meetings—parents, special education teachers, general education teachers, administrators and clinicians such as psychologists, nurses, and social workers—students self-reported the lowest prior knowledge about their IEP meeting. It seems that the student—who is the focus of the IEP document and meeting—has very little say in what goes into their educational plan.

Other research, however, demonstrates the value of including students. Mason et al. (2004), show that students who led their IEP meetings were better informed about their own disabilities, rights, and accommodations, and that the act of leading the meeting resulted in improved self-advocacy and self-confidence. Wehmeyer and Field (2007) cite several studies that indicate increased engagement, classroom involvement, and academic skills as immediate benefits of learning self-determination skills.

Communication with adults and other decision-makers can be improved through the skills learned in the process of leading an IEP meeting. For example, when students understand their legal rights, they can better explain them to their parents (Mason, et. al., 2004). Students gain important social and problem-solving skills that can be used throughout their academic careers, in post-secondary settings, and in the work world. Wehmeyer and Field (2007) found that

¹ All student names have been changed.

² Inclusion classes provide opportunities for students with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms.

students with higher levels of self-determination skills had improved employment outcomes, greater access to job benefits, increased earning potential, and a measurably higher quality of life. As a result, finding opportunities to improve student engagement in their IEP meetings would seem to be a logical, as well as moral, imperative.

In the 2014-2015 school year, I participated in a teacher-led study group, funded by the Chicago Foundation for Education (CFE)³, through which I learned how to better involve students in their transition planning; that is, planning for the transition from middle school to high school or from high school to postsecondary options. Building on, for example, the principles of universal design, in which accessibility features are intentionally built into the design of an end product, and the work of Wehmeyer and Field (2007), who have studied how to increase self-determination skills in students, families, and teachers, our group worked to teach self-determination skills to our elementary school special education students. I began to see the impact of explicitly instructing these students about their disability and about the educational supports they had available.

One such student was Samuel, an eighth-grader with a specific learning disability⁴, whose instructional settings for language arts had evolved from general education with no services, to an inclusion classroom for reading and a resource (separate) class for writing, to resource classes for both reading and writing. The IEP team, without Samuel's participation, had decided that it was best for him to stay in the resource setting until he met specific benchmarks—grades, fluency and comprehension goals, and standardized test scores. We communicated these criteria to Samuel. Mid-year, he approached his teachers armed with his data: he had met all of our targets and was ready for inclusion. Even without the opportunity to participate in decision-making, Samuel was empowered by knowing what he needed to do academically in order to change settings, and was able to advocate for himself.

Inspired by these students, during the 2015-16 school year I set out to shift our school's policy for engaging students in their IEPs. A change in scheduling meant that four different special education teachers would have overlapping caseloads for all middle school students, meaning that most students with IEPs would receive support from two or three different special education teachers in different content areas. I approached these other teachers at the start of the school year with the idea that all sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students would prepare for and participate in their IEP meetings. They all agreed and committed to doing the additional work to meet with students. We sat down with our administration and case manager to discuss our proposal, sharing both anecdotal successes about student participation and research about the positive long-term benefits of self-determination. With administrative support, we began to communicate with students, parents, clinicians, and general education teachers about our intention to prepare all middle school students to participate as members of their IEP team.

³ For more information about this organization and its programs supporting teacher development, see <http://www.cfegrants.org/>

⁴ Specific learning disability is a label defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): "The term 'specific learning disability' means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations." See <http://idea.ed.gov/> for details.

What follows is a discussion of the work I undertook as an individual action research project (also supported by CFE), based on this policy shift. I wanted to know, primarily, what would happen to the student's role in the annual IEP meeting and how their knowledge of specific components of the IEP might change if they were included in meaningful planning for and with the IEP team. The other middle school special education teachers kept notes on their engagements with students before and during IEP meetings. I collected data on the 16 students who were on my caseload and who participated in both the pre- and post-surveys I administered.

The Practice of Involving Students

In my math and science resource classes, where all students have IEPs, I started pulling back the curtain on what special education means, why students are in a separate classroom, and what goes on in an IEP meeting—information many of my students had never discussed and most knew little about. These general conversations were meant to remove the taboo of talking about disability, help students support each other in the process of learning about their own IEPs, and make IEP goal-related work explicit to the students⁵. Sometimes I planned these conversations; other times students asked questions that prompted a whole-class chat. Normalizing the discussion of learning differences made one-on-one meetings with students more comfortable.

In the weeks leading up to each student's annual meeting, which take place throughout the school year, I sat down with them individually to talk about the meeting, review their previous IEP, record their input about their strengths, needs, and accommodations, and give them an overview of my recommendations in terms of placement, supports, and goals. I also met with each student at the end of each academic quarter to review their IEP goals, ask them to reflect on their progress, share my assessment of their achievement, and discuss their next quarterly goal. These meetings provided an opportunity to instruct students about the specific contents of their IEP and engage them in monitoring their own progress on an ongoing basis. I usually completed these meetings during one or two class periods while other students engaged in semi-independent tasks such as completing study guides or making corrections on a recent quiz. A benefit to conducting this research in the resource setting was that, as the sole teacher, I could make time for these activities. A future study of how these practices work for co-teachers in the inclusion setting would be very informative.

An important component of each IEP is the list of accommodations and modifications (A&M) students have available to them in order to access the curriculum. These vary based on student need, and typically include supports such as having material read aloud to them or extended time on tests. In resource settings, teachers often provide these A&M universally, so that all students benefit. Students are not always aware what supports they are entitled to, nor how to ask for them when needed. As Hart and Brehm (2013) explained in their 10-step model for training elementary students to self-advocate for accommodations, students require direct instruction about A&M, opportunities to practice asking for them, and help with problem-solving when they are not given. Informed by this model, I provided each student with a copy of his or her assessment A&M page and spent part of a class period explaining what the terms meant, describing the different ways an accommodation might look in practice, role-playing how to ask

⁵ Some of the resources I found helpful in determining my approach to preparation include Hart & Brehm (2013) and Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson (2004).

for A&M, and strategizing what to do if a teacher denies their request. Then, before each classroom test or quiz, I asked students to take out their A&M page and identify which accommodations they might use during the assessment and how these accommodations would help them.

On the day of a student's IEP meeting, I reminded them that they had already prepared what they wanted to say, and that they would sit next to me or another special education teacher in order to be able to read their comments directly from the electronic document. At minimum, I asked students to be prepared to introduce themselves. During the meeting itself, I recorded student participation using an observational checklist I adapted from the student leadership steps identified by Martin et al. (2006b) (see Appendix). I also noted adult interactions with the student, in particular whether the teachers and clinicians spoke mostly to the parent or the student. For more reluctant students, additional prompting during the meeting was offered, or questions posed directly to the student in order to invite their participation.

Student Outcomes

As the data and narratives below reveal, not all students demonstrated increased self-determination skills in all areas. As a special education teacher, I believe I am conditioned to celebrate progress whenever I see it: small steps towards a larger goal, a slightly better outcome than previously, a moment of success. While the numbers may not be astounding, they reflect an increase in student participation over previous years, as well as a foundation for our special education team to build on in the years to come. How much more prepared will an eighth grader be for that transition planning meeting, having been a member of the team as a seventh grader? When my sixth graders are entering high school, they will be able to speak for themselves much more readily, having had years of practice. Even if the majority of students were not able (yet) to achieve a particular outcome, they have begun to develop important self-advocacy skills.

Overall, I found the immediate outcomes in my students extremely positive. More students attended their IEP meetings than ever before, and they had a better understanding of what their IEP meant. Students more openly communicated with each other in the classroom about the supports provided by their IEP. On several occasions, students offered each other encouragement as they got ready to attend their IEP meeting for the first time. The stories of just a few of my students illustrate the impact of my interventions.

Matthew. Matthew, an eighth grade student with a specific learning disability, increased his self-awareness of learning preferences, and was able to describe the conditions he needs to be successful on a classroom test, by referring to the specific accommodations written in his plan: "Once I'm able to breakdown the sentence with highlighters ("key words") and I'm in a different section of the room I'd be in the zone." Like the other students included in my research, Matthew gained the ability to list at least one specific accommodation he would need on a classroom test and reflect on how it would help him do his best work. Matthew's engagement in his annual IEP meeting was notable in that he was extremely calm, conversational, and reflective. While he was active in advocating for himself, he nonetheless told me afterwards that he felt "disappointment." When asked to explain his feelings about the meeting, I learned that Matthew's disappointment was "because I didn't get moved to another class like I was supposed to." Matthew thought there

was a possibility of changing placements to inclusion for social studies, but found out at the meeting that his social studies teacher had decided it would not be in Matthew's best interest to change classes so close to the end of the school year. Although Matthew's wishes were not met, his comments reveal a high level of knowledge about his placement and his personal goals. Like Matthew, five other students gave input on their placement in their annual meeting for the first time.

Camila. Camila, a sixth-grade student with a specific learning disability, improved her reflection skills about her progress towards her math IEP goals through our quarterly meetings. When asked what evidence she had for whether or not she was making adequate progress towards her math goals, Camila reflected: "[I am] doing good on group [but] not so good on homework." She knew what her IEP goals were, recognized that her small group work in class was designed to work on those goals, and felt that she was demonstrating achievement in class. She also knew that some of her homework assignments related specifically to her goals and that she was not completing them. She could explain that she knew how she was doing on these goals because of "when we meet 1-on-1 in math." Similarly, some of Camila's peers demonstrated improved self-awareness of IEP goals, with six students able to name a specific IEP goal. By the end of the second quarter, students' self-assessments of their goal progress matched mine in 20 out of 26 cases (this number reflects that some students have more than one IEP goal in math and or science). Both of these data points show moderate improvement from the beginning of the school year.

When asked to reflect on her participation in the annual IEP meeting, which I was unable to attend, Camila initially reported that she had not spoken. I later probed more deeply, showing her the notes the other special education teacher had taken about her participation in the meeting. Camila explained that she *had* spoken, but did not feel *heard*. In particular, during a discussion of whether she was ready to move to an inclusion placement for science, Camila's parent disagreed with Camila and the rest of the team. While Camila felt that her voice was discounted, the act of speaking up for herself is another piece of evidence that she was, in fact, ready to be in the inclusion setting. As Hart and Brehm (2013) have shown, young students can better function in the inclusion setting when they understand their disability and accommodations. With her increased knowledge about the process and the opportunity to practice in the IEP meeting, Camila would be better equipped to self-advocate for needed supports in the inclusion setting.

Awareness of accommodations. On several occasions, I asked students to reflect on their use of accommodations, and helped them recognize when supports were being offered to them. Many students were surprised to discover that their IEP included accommodations for World Languages, meaning that they could ask their Spanish teacher for additional supports on class assignments and tests. Some students began to self-advocate for a so-called "stop-the-clock break" accommodation, using a quick water or bathroom break to refocus themselves during a class test. Even without prompting, students showed increased awareness about accommodations, as one special education teacher reported:

I have noticed students self advocating and feeling comfortable justifying their A&M. For example, once a student was listening to music while working independently, and another student questioned whether this was fair. He calmly replied, "this is in my IEP--

listening to music helps me focus so it's something I'm allowed to do sometimes." I thought that was awesome.

By the end of the study, all 16 students could name a specific accommodation and describe how it would help them on a test; however, only six could name a specific time they had asked for an accommodation in class. Giving students the opportunity to practice self-advocacy in a supported setting is crucial for developing assertiveness, a skill which can transfer to other settings, such as college or career, in the future, as Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) showed in their study of student-led IEPs. Even if only six students were ready to take on the challenge of asking for an accommodation, I am hopeful that with continued support and practice, more will develop this skill over time.

Student-Centered Teams

Empowering student voices is always a good idea, and is particularly important for students with disabilities. Their voices have been silenced and ignored, when they need to be amplified and elevated. The many long-lasting benefits of teaching self-determination skills are clear, and students with special needs should have many opportunities to practice these skills as members of their educational planning teams. Special education teachers should know that including students in their educational planning is both important and easy to implement. There are so many entry points; one could start with any aspect of the IEP, such as goals, accommodations, placement, or the annual meeting.

Starting this work with eighth grade students, who are required by law to participate in transition planning, makes sense. But younger students are certainly capable of engaging in the educational planning process. Resources such as the Virginia Department of Education Self-Determination Project⁶ can help teachers scaffold participation for young elementary students, engaging them in reporting interests, describing skills, and preparing materials to share at their annual meeting.

Educators can develop different pathways that make sense in their context and for their students—whether that is a coordinated team approach to a large group of students or a specialized intervention for particular students. While the results thus far are significant, further professional development is needed in order to better enable teachers to encourage student voice and self-advocacy. As one special education teacher at my school reflected,

The information I share hasn't changed but the *way* I share it has for sure. It has really made me think more about how I communicate the negatives about a student. It has made me focus a lot more on the positives and the ways they have grown, since I want the student to hear those things and hold on to them as motivation.

Thinking again of Camila, it is also important to recognize that simply giving the student the opportunity to speak is not enough. When we invite students to speak, we must listen, and that can be uncomfortable for adults who are used to having a sense of control.

⁶ <http://www.imdetermined.org/>

The idea of centering the IEP process on the student can and should grow. I hope to see students begin to collaborate with their teachers on writing and monitoring their IEP goals, advocating for appropriate placement changes, and asking for needed accommodations across settings. By shifting the model of IEP planning from one of adult control to one of student-centeredness, we can empower students with the skills they need to become advocates for themselves.

Author Notes

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Appendix

IEP Observation Log

Name:

Date:

Student Leadership Steps

- 1 = introduce self
- 2 = introduce IEP team members
- 3 = state purpose of meeting
- 4 = review past goals and progress
- 5 = ask for feedback
- 6 = ask questions if didn't understand
- 7 = deal with differences in opinion
- 8 = state needed support
- 9 = express interest
- 10 = express skills and limits
- 11 = express opinions and goals
- 12 = close meeting by thanking everyone

Notes:

Observations of Student During Meeting/Quotes:

Observations of Adults During Meeting/Quotes: