

Perceptions of Student Involvement in the Construction of their own IEP's

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Abstract

Based on the fact that students are often not included in the construction of their own Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals and objectives, the researcher developed the question; Are students more likely to achieve the criteria listed in their IEPs when they are involved in construction of their goals and objectives? The researcher distributed surveys to students, parents and teachers in order to draw conclusions regarding each group of participants' perceptions on whether or not students should be involved in their own IEP meetings. After collecting and reviewing the data, the researcher concluded that both parents' and teachers' perceptions seemed to be focused on the age of students and if they are in fact ready to participate in the construction of their own goals and objectives. For the most part, students were in favor of being a part of their own IEP planning. This study is critical in the field of special education because it is important that students with disabilities are able to achieve their IEP goals and objectives.

Introduction

Through continual experiences and education in the field of special education, the researcher has come to believe that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) serve as one of, if not *the* most important document in the lives of students who have disabilities. In the researcher's experiences working in schools with children who have disabilities, she has often seen how an IEP is able to provide a great deal of guidance and a significant sense of direction for students in their educational success. Working with students who have disabilities proves that an IEP is an extremely important official document that allows teachers as well as students and their families to have a clear view of what they are working towards.

Due to the very important role that an IEP plays in a student's educational career, the researcher is a very strong supporter of having students involved in their own IEP planning, and more specifically in their own goal and short-term objective planning. The researcher personally believes that if students are part of their objective and goal setting they will be much more likely to personalize their goals, and therefore much more likely to work towards achieving them as well. The researcher also considers it very important for goals and objectives to serve some personal meaning to students. If students are able to find meaning and importance within their IEP goals and objectives, it is believed that they will become more motivated and interested in the importance of working towards their goals and short-term objectives and therefore, much more likely to accomplish them. IEP meetings are meant to "set meaningful goals to advance students' self-determination and

transition” (Keyes & Owen-Johnson, 2003). The researcher is a strong supporter of the idea that this is much more likely to happen when the students themselves become active participants in the development of the criteria listed in their IEPs, especially goals and objectives. As the researcher, I expect to validate this statement as a result of the data collection and interpretation involved in this study.

There are several educational theorists that would comply with the idea that students should play an active role in their goal and objective setting during an IEP meeting. Lev Vygotsky’s, theory on cognitive development would suggest that all students should be involved as much as possible in their IEP team meeting and planning. Vygotsky’s theory focuses on the role of the child and the teacher and he believes that teaching is a social exchange where shared meaning is created (Peterson & Hittie, 2003).

The researcher personally views an IEP meeting as a large collaborative effort where students should be interacting and expressing their own needs and wants to others. Each member of an IEP team needs to communicate their connections and views regarding the student in a clear and understandable way. Vygotsky believes that communication along with socialization between children and adults is an essential component in a child’s development (Peterson & Hittie, 2003).

The researcher’s ideas relating to student involvement are supported by Piaget’s findings as well. These findings prove that during an IEP meeting it is essential that the student communicate with the adults who are present in order to develop an effective educational plan for themselves (Peterson & Hittie, 2003). Jean Piaget also believes that children must construct their own meaning. The researcher supports this

theory through the idea of students becoming active participants in the formation of their goals and objectives. As a result of a student's direct involvement, the contents of their IEP will hold a great deal of personal meaning to them (Peterson & Hittie, 2003). As Piaget states, the researcher also concurs that if students familiarize and understand their goals and objectives they will become much more obtainable. If a student fails to be present at their own IEP meeting developing an understanding or meaning of their goals, objectives, and the IEP as a whole will be very difficult (Peterson & Hittie, 2003).

The researcher believes that because students are not required by law and may or may not be encouraged by the other members of an IEP team as well as their families to become involved in the creation of their goals and short-term objectives, they are often not seen as important individuals in the planning and creation of their own IEPs. The researcher is also concerned that both students and parents lack a great deal of knowledge regarding IEPs, including the creation and setting of the goals and short-term objectives. For these reasons, the researcher believes it is important to determine whether or not students are in fact more likely to be successful in reaching the goals and short term objectives on their IEPs when they are actually members of the team and involved in their objective and goal setting. In order to do this, the researcher found that a detailed study must be implemented. The overall importance of this study is to see if a relationship does actually exist between student participation and their achievement levels regarding the specific criteria listed in their IEPs.

Initially, it is essential that in this study I plan to survey the opinions and views of the members of an IEP team. People who are present at an actual IEP meeting will be surveyed on the importance of the student's presence at their own IEP meeting and, more importantly, their participation in the construction of their goals and short-term objectives. Parents, teachers, and other school officials that may offer services to the student are usually present at an IEP meeting and will all be included in the survey that is given (Peterson & Hittie, 2003). It is hoped and anticipated that this study will reveal that the student's presence and participation at the meeting is valued in the eyes of each IEP team member.

The next important step in the study that the researcher will conduct includes actually interviewing or surveying the student for whom the goals and short-term objectives are formed. This interview will include questions that will allow the researcher to determine whether or not they are familiar with their IEP goals and objectives. As the researcher, I will ask the students if they know what they are working towards. If they are in fact aware of what they are working to improve, the interview will try to determine how they plan to achieve what they are working for. Students also may or may not be aware of ways in which they are working collaboratively with teachers, peers, and family members to accomplish the goals and objectives set in their IEPs. This interview and survey will also include questions that will ask students how they feel about being involved in their own IEP meetings and the forming of their goals and short-term objectives.

The next step will include actually viewing the goals and short-term objectives in the IEPs of the students who were actively involved in creating them, as

well as those of students were not actively involved. Part of the evaluation in the study will be a comparison between what the students said during their interviews and what their IEPs actually reflect. The researcher expects more of a positive correlation with the students who were actually involved in the objective and goal setting and what they said in their interviews. In other words they will be more likely to achieve the criteria if they are familiar with it. However, the students who were not involved in their objective and goal setting will be expected to have a much more unclear view of what they are working towards in regard to their goals and objectives. Because of this, the researcher expects them to be unaware of the specific ways they are working in order to reach the goals and objectives in their IEPs.

Eventually, the interviews and surveys will be tied together to reach conclusions about students' achievement when they are compared to when they are not involved in the forming of their IEP goals and short-term objectives. This information could be of critical importance to professionals, families, and the students themselves who participate in IEP meetings. However, the study will not attempt to promote the actual involvement of students in their own IEP meetings or the construction of their goals and objectives.

From the conclusion it is hoped that the question the researcher has formed will be answered. Are students more likely to achieve the criteria included in their goals and short-term objectives that are listed in their Individualized Education Programs, and in which they are currently working towards when they have actively participated in setting those goals and short-term objectives? The researcher assumes that the completion of several surveys along with the collection and viewing of IEP

goals and objectives will result in the findings that reflect a higher success rate for students who are involved in the construction of their own IEPs.

Review of Literature

Individualized Education Programs became a required part of children with disabilities' education programs in 1975. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act along with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 ensured that children with disabilities receive appropriate educations in public schools (Rubinfeld & Brown 1996). The regulations in IDEA mandated that students with disabilities be placed in the least restrictive environment based on their Individualized Education Plans. At this time IEPs became an essential component in the education of students with disabilities. Parents were then given the right to be sure that their child was given an appropriate education that complied with the contents of their IEP. IEPs continue to be an instrumental piece in the education of children with disabilities.

Based on current and ongoing research, there are a few different people who play important roles in IEP meetings and the planning of the student's goals and short-term objectives (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen 2003). These people include parents or guardians, teachers, and the students themselves. Each one of these roles in IEP planning is critical. Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) also continue to reinforce the importance of the student's presence at their own IEP meetings. Throughout the literature, parents and teachers have certain views on how the students' participation might be helpful in achieving the goals and objectives that are set in their IEPs. The literature viewed by the researcher focused on the roles that each of these individual people has in an IEP meeting. The researcher has also

viewed the ways in which each of their presence and views play into students' goals and objective achievement levels, as well as the students' involvement in their own IEP planning.

Parents and Guardians

The research reveals that many people believe parents and guardians of students who have disabilities are given the opportunity to play a very important role in an IEP meeting, including the creation of the student's goals and objectives.

Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) have found that a parent's participation does in fact have a positive impact on a student's education, achievement levels, and the student's participation in their own IEP planning.

Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) conducted a study that included a telephone survey, which 45 parents of students' with autism participated. The survey included questions surrounding parents' communication with IEP team members and their involvement in their child's IEP. Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen's (2003) findings found that families and schools communicated on a regular basis. Parents also believed they were knowledgeable and involved in their child's IEP process.

In the conclusion of their study, Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) continue to mention the fact that it is very important for the parents and families of students with disabilities to communicate with schools on how they might enhance their child's learning experiences and their ability to achieve their IEP goals and objectives.

Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) state that many parents and guardians have been extremely dependent on professionals within the school to know what their children may need, as well as providing it for them. As a result, it has been noticed that this is

not necessary or beneficial for children. Children with special needs will benefit from receiving educational support services at their home environments as well their school environments (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen 2003).

According to Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003), since 1997 when there were amendments added to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), parents were then given equal access to their child's records and an equal say in the nature of the special education services that their child would receive. The law that included amendments to IDEA was passed in 1997 and is the key to a parent's involvement in the IEP meeting process and the forming of their child's goals and objectives. Through becoming involved, a parent or guardian may be able to help their child outside of school. They may be able to increase the likelihood and assist the child in achieving the criteria that is listed in their IEPs if they are more familiar with it.

Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) state that there are several precautions schools and teachers must follow through with when involving parents in their student's IEP process. Communication is one particular aspect that is always extremely important. Frequent communication needs to be present at all times in order to be able to correspond on a regular basis with one another regarding the child's present level of performance. Spann, Kohler & Soenksen (2003) continue to state that many different forms of communication can be very helpful for parents and help them become aware of what they might be able to do at home to assist their children with reaching their IEP goals and objectives. Email, telephone, frequent meetings, and letters sent home are all ways in which teachers and parents might

communicate with one another. Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) also mention that it is very helpful to invite parents and guardians to participate in any school activities.

Furthermore, allowing parents to give their input regarding their child's education will help schools form an important and beneficial partnership with parents and guardians of students with special needs. Through the researcher's experiences with working in schools, it has been noticed that supportive parental suggestions can be extremely helpful. This has proven that parents are most likely to know their children best, along with knowing the services that will be beneficial to the children. These services will be likely to assist students in accomplishing the goals and objectives set in their IEPs.

Spann, Kohler & Soenksen (2003) also conclude from their study that many times once parents or guardians are involved in an IEP meeting, they fail to be involved in the continuation of the services their children will receive. They may not follow through with the services they had promised to provide at home. For this reason, the researcher concludes it is important to involve parents in the IEP meeting and be sure there is a great deal of clarity and conciseness as to what the parents may continue to do for their children outside of school. Other family members may also be involved and play key roles in the process as well.

It is also proven through the research that Spann, Kohler & Soenksen (2003) conducted, that parents' and guardians' levels of satisfaction concerning the services their children are receiving will be much higher when they are given the opportunity to be involved in the IEP meetings. As a result, it would be much more likely for parents to assist their children and become involved in their education if they are

satisfied with it. It is important that they are aware of what their children are in fact receiving to assist them with their special needs. Students would be given a great amount of support from both school and home and therefore, they would be more likely to achieve the goals and objectives listed in their IEPs.

Grigal, Neubert, Moon, and Graham (2003) viewed the opinions of parents concerning students with disabilities and their levels of self-determination through the conduction of a survey. Prior to the research, the researchers stated that students who do have their families and parents involved in the IEP process have greater levels of determination and accomplishment regarding their goals and objectives. Grigal, Neubert, Moon and Graham surveyed parents of students with high and low incidence disabilities in order to examine their beliefs regarding their child's self-determination skills, which included participation in their own IEP meetings. Conclusions drawn from the study included that parents are supportive of teaching self-determination skills through involving students in their own IEP meetings.

Furthermore, Grigal, Nerbert, Moon, and Graham's (2003) study proved that parents and guardians agreed that all students should be involved in their own IEP meetings in order to increase their levels of self-determination, which will also lead to a greater likelihood of achieving the goals and objectives that have been set.

Teachers

Several teachers who have contributed their thoughts into the National Education Association (NEA) Today (2001) have mentioned a few reasons why parents may be hesitant to attend IEP meetings in order to assist their children with accomplishing their learning goals and objectives. While many of these thoughts expressed in the

NEA Today may be based on facts, they may also be assumptions that are viewed as erroneous. First of all, they expressed the fact that it may simply be an inconvenient time for the parents to attend the meetings. They mentioned that it is very convenient if teachers allow the parents to set up the meeting times according to their availability. Parents will be much more likely to attend the meetings and become involved when they are able to set the meeting at a good time for them.

Teachers have also mentioned that it can be very beneficial and increase a student's likelihood of achieving their goals and objectives if teachers take the time to get to know the parents and the families of the students they are working with personally. They will become much more comfortable with the teacher and develop a sense of trust in what they can do to help their children be successful. The NEA Today (2001) wrote that the collaboration between the parents and teachers will result in a better opportunity for the student to be successful. In addition, the authors of the NEA Today also state their opinions, which include that IEP meetings can often be very intimidating for parents. For this reason, it is helpful if the teachers give the parents a written agenda that they can follow throughout the meeting. Another teacher who entered their thoughts in the NEA Today (2001) mentioned that they always make sure that they meet the parent ahead of time and then go to the meeting together, so the parent does not feel intimidated by the school officials. Teachers can help parents feel that they are not alone at the meeting and they are in fact part of the team. They should also be sure they sit next to the parent in case they have any questions, so they can feel comfortable asking them. It is important for teachers to develop a relationship with parents that include frequent communication.

According to Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004), both special educators and regular teachers are much more enthusiastic about working with students who are involved in their own IEP process and know what goals and objectives they are working towards. However, according to Mason, Field, and Sawilowsky (2004) the study and surveys they conducted reflected the fact that teachers are unsure of how to initially involve students in their own IEP goal and objective setting at their IEP meeting. This lack of knowledge is affecting students' determination and involvement in regards to the goals and objectives listed in their IEPs (Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004). Therefore, teachers must find effective ways to involve their students in learning experiences where they can reach to achieve their IEP goals and objectives. This is a considerable gap including students in their own IEP construction. Students must be provided with the knowledge and skills to become involved and valuable members of their own IEP team.

Hapner and Imel (2002) wrote an article on how important it is for teachers to listen to their students. In their article they wrote that a lot of times students are able to express what they need in order to succeed. It can also be very helpful if teachers take the opportunity to listen to them. They also expressed the fact that it is extremely important to listen to the parents and family members of the students they are working with. They explained that the students and their family members do know themselves and what might help them the most. Therefore, it is important to listen to their thoughts and ideas. This shows a great deal of respect on the teacher's part as well.

Students

According to the literature, students play the most important role in their own IEP planning, including the goal and objective setting. Much of the literature that has been reviewed proves that student participation along with the participation of their parents and teachers does affect their ability to achieve the goals and objectives listed in their IEPs. The literature has also helped to reinforce the researcher's personal beliefs that students do in fact play an essential role in their IEP goal and objective planning.

According to Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) students should lead their IEP meetings because they will be much more knowledgeable about their disabilities, rights, and the accommodations they will receive. These authors also mention that students having a leadership role in the creation of their own IEPs will result in an increased self-confidence level. It will also lead to a high likelihood of them being familiar with the goals and objectives listed in their IEPs. As a result, they will be much more likely to work towards and achieve them. Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) mention that teachers are much more enthusiastic about working with students who are in charge of their own IEPs and familiar with the contents of them due to their increased confidence levels. These authors also expressed the importance of student led IEP meetings because it allows them the opportunity to prepare and strengthen their involvement in transition planning, which is something every student with disabilities will experience in their education.

Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) make another valid point when they mention that students who have experience in leading their own IEP meetings,

along with their goal and objective setting, can assist and be mentors to other students with disabilities who have not yet had the opportunity to do so. Mason, McGahee-Kovac and Johnson can accomplish this through a number of steps that have been listed in their article. Surveys and interviews conducted in this study among students and teachers prove that students can be successful as peer mentors. Students who partake in being peer mentors and being peer mentored will both continue to grow and increase their confidence levels.

Zickel and Arnold (2001) explain that students do not understand their disabilities much of the time; therefore, they are unable to advocate for themselves. Often times, students might be uncomfortable with their disability and have difficulties coping with it as well. If a student is unaware of what accommodations and services might assist them with their disability, they might not be able to attend an IEP meeting and be involved in effectively setting their goals and objectives. They express that self-advocacy and self-determination are the most important goals and first steps for students to gain independence for themselves. This is crucial because it will lead to a great deal of confidence and a much more passionate desire to learn.

Zickel and Arnold (2001) created a method to assist students in writing their own goals and objectives in their IEPs called the Self-Advocacy Circle. The four sections they included in their method were reflecting, goal setting, speaking up, and checking. They were able to practice this idea through role-playing with both their students who had disabilities and those who did not. These steps helped the students with disabilities learn about their disability and ways in which they were able to

advocate for themselves during the creation of their IEPs. Self-advocacy will help students a great deal in achieving their goals and objectives.

Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, and Algozzine (2004) continue to express the fact that self-determination, advocacy, and determination all stem from a student's ability to be involved in their own IEP goal and objective setting. Their findings show that students should always take an important leadership role in developing their own goals and objectives. They state that many children with disabilities begin to set their goals at a young age. The goals they set are used to determine their actions, which prove the importance of having their own self-determination in mind. Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, and Algozzine (2001) also suggest that if students do set their own IEP goals and objectives, it will bring a great deal of meaning into the effort they apply towards accomplishing them.

Conclusion

After viewing all of the research, the researcher has become a much stronger supporter of the fact that students should be involved in their own IEP goal and objective setting. Much of the information has provided a great deal of factual information that supports my beliefs. The researcher no longer believes that IEPs can or should be constructed without the person who they are actually being made for. As the researcher, I believe that these authors have also helped reach the conclusion that the student's family members play an extremely important role in self-determination skills. These skills are directly related to the goals and objectives students are hoping to accomplish by working on them outside of school. Teachers also play an important role in the student's ability to achieve the goals and objectives that have

been set in their IEPs. They do this by helping students understand their strengths and weaknesses, along with the services that may be available to assist them with accomplishing their goals and objectives. The literature also showed an extremely important role that teachers and parents play as a collaborative effort. Furthermore, it has become more evident to me that students are the most important factor in the creation of their own IEP goal and objective setting. In order for them to be successful they must take ownership themselves and personalize their IEP goals and objectives that they hope to accomplish. My study regarding this matter is needed to show that this research will continue to hold true in further research.

During this study the researcher will be surveying students, special educators, administrators and parents in order to become better aware of what their perceptions regarding student participation in their own IEP planning is. The researcher will continue by viewing several students' (both those who have and have not participated in their own IEP planning) IEPs, grades, goals, and objectives in order to find which students seem to be more successful in general. The researcher hypothesizes that students who are in fact involved in the construction of their own IEPs will be more successful academically and this will be reflected by their grades along with their accomplishments related to the goal and objectives set in their IEPs.

Methods

Students' achievement levels are one of the most important components to forming an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Therefore, the main purposes of this study, which included the implementation of the three different surveys, were to reach conclusions regarding student involvement in their own IEP meetings. In addition, it was also hoped that the researcher would be able to reach conclusions about students' achievement levels when they are compared to when they are not involved in the forming of their own IEP goals and short-term objectives.

Subjects

The subjects that participated in the study are nine to eleven year old students along with their teachers in an elementary school. The school is set in a suburban area and ranges from grades three to five. The students who participated in the study have moderate disabilities, such as autism, learning disabled, ADHD, and speech impaired. The teachers are all Caucasian females who have general or special education certificates. Out of the 12 surveys that were given out, seven of the homes were single parent and five were married.

Instruments

In this study, the researcher collected data through an anonymous and unpublished survey for each of the subjects developed by the researcher for the purposes of this study (see Appendices A, B and C). Each of the surveys were given and viewed by a panel of three experts in order to determine face validity of these instruments. Reliability of the instruments was reached by using SPSS, version 12.

The first of three surveys was given to Special Educators and Administrators who attend and play active roles in IEP meetings. This survey included seven questions. The Parent Survey included six questions. The Student Survey consisted of eight questions. Each survey was accompanied by a consent form, which was completed prior to the completion of the surveys and data collection (see Appendix A, B and C).

Procedure

The survey was distributed on March 1, 2005. The teachers received the surveys in their school mailboxes. There was a consent form attached explaining why the survey was being conducted. It also stated that all the information would be kept anonymous. The teachers were informed of the mailbox number in which surveys could be placed in order to return them to the researcher. The parents received the survey in an envelope sent home with the students. Each of the parental surveys included a letter stating the purposes, consent, and anonymity information. The students had the surveys read and scribed for them along with any additional needed explanation on an individual basis. All of the survey participants were also notified of where and when they would be able to find the results of the study. All of the volunteers were given one week to complete the survey.

Debriefing

The researcher provided a detailed explanation and overview of the results of the study by sending each of the parents and teachers who participated in the study a detailed summary of the results along with thank you notes for their participation.

These are the subjects, instruments, and procedures the researcher used in this study. Any changes in the research design will be reported and explained in the results section of the study.

Results

The researcher initially conducted a study to determine if students with disabilities are more likely to achieve the criteria included in their goals and short-term objectives that are listed in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and in which they are currently working towards when they have actively participated in setting those goals and short-term objects. However, due to the fact that none of the participants responding to this survey have been on an IEP team when the student was involved, the researcher focused on viewing the perceptions of parents, teachers, and students regarding student involvement in the creation of their own IEPs instead. The researcher utilized a quasi-experimental research design in order to conduct descriptive research. The researcher also used surveys developed by the researcher for the purposes of this study (see Appendices A, B, and C). The researcher has analyzed the data both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Qualitative Results

A case study approach was used to analyze the data qualitatively. The researcher viewed the responses of each group of participants separately (parents- N=5, teachers- N=3, and students- N=5). Their perceptions, which were reflected by the responses given when they completed the surveys, are displayed exactly as recorded in tables created by the researcher (Tables 1-3). There were differences in the ways each group of participants responded. Parents seemed to feel that if their children were in grades four or five they should be involved in their IEP goal and objective setting, while parents of third grade students felt that their children would

not benefit from participating. All of the students, with the exception of one, seemed to feel as though they should be involved in their own IEP goal and objective setting. Teachers' responses reflected the idea that student involvement should be based on an individual case-to-case basis.

Five parents returned their surveys along with consent forms. Refer to Table 1 to view the parents' responses. As shown, 100% of the parents answered no to question one stating that their child had never attended one of their own IEP meetings, which lead to no responses to question two. The researcher choose to view questions three and five together due to the common nature of the questions, which were focused on whether students should be present at their own IEP meetings. Two parents (40%) were in favor of having their children present at their IEP meetings, while three (60%) were concerned that their children were too young to benefit from being involved in their own goal and objective setting. Their reasoning behind answering no was that their children are too young to understand their goals and objectives. The parents who answered yes were parents of fourth and fifth grade students. In regards to question number six, the same pattern seemed to follow. The same two of the five parents believed that their children would be more likely to achieve their goals and objectives if they were involved in the setting of them, while three of the parents with third grade children thought their children were too young at this point. All of the parents seemed to agree that age plays a major factor in a student's participation in their own IEP goal and objective setting. This pattern will be elaborated in the conclusion.

Three teachers completed the surveys and their responses are displayed in Table 2. Questions one through four were answered no by each of the participants. Each of these questions asked the participant if they had ever worked with a student who was involved in their own IEP goal and objective setting. Question seven, which asked if students were more or less likely to achieve their IEP goals and objectives when they are involved in setting them, was also unable to be answered by each teacher. Therefore, the researcher performed a qualitative analysis on the responses to questions five and six. Once again, there seemed to be a high degree of similarity between each of the participants' responses in this category. When answering question five, all of the teachers (100%) believed that students being present at their own IEP meetings should be decided on a case-to-case basis. Age level of the students was a factor for the teachers, just as it was for the parents. In regards to question six and the role students should play if they are in fact present at an IEP meeting, the teachers varied slightly in their responses. Two of the teachers (66.6%) believed that students should express their strengths and needs; while one (33.3%) believed they should become more aware of the goals they are working towards at an IEP meeting.

Five student participants each had the surveys read and scribed to them. The researcher also included additional explanation if it was needed. All five of the students answered no to questions one and four, which asked them if they knew what an IEP was and if they have ever attended their own IEP meeting. The students answering no to these questions lead to no responses to questions two, three, five and six (see Table 3). Question seven showed that none of the students were aware of the

IEP goals, which they are currently working towards. Question number eight confirmed that four out of five (80%) of the students who completed this survey believed they should be involved in setting their own IEP goals and objectives. The students' reasoning varied, but centered on the point that it would assist them in the learning process. One student (20%) stated that they should not be present at their own IEP meeting because he believed it would be too much for him. The researcher noticed that this student was in fact in third grade, so age was apparently a determinant once again.

Descriptive and Quantitative Results

Quantitative analysis of independent samples T-Test was computed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 12. The results are found in Table 4. The results of descriptive statistics also computed using SPSS are displayed in Table 5. Interpretation of these results will be discussed in the conclusions section.

Conclusions

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is viewed by many professionals in the special education field as the most important document regarding the education of students with disabilities. For this reason, the researcher believes it is essential that students take part in the creation of their own IEPs, and more specifically, the construction of their own goals and objectives. If students with disabilities are given the opportunity to become active participants in their educational programs, the researcher believes it will result in a great deal of empowerment, as well as a higher level of success for students. For the purposes of this study, the research question was posed: Are students more likely to achieve the criteria included in their goals and short-term objectives that are listed in their Individualized Education Programs, and in which they are currently working towards when they have actively participated in setting those goals and short-term objectives?

The researcher initially decided to conduct this study due to the lack of support students with disabilities seem to be given in schools regarding their involvement in their own IEPs. This research was originally carried out to find out if students are in fact more likely to achieve the goals and objectives listed in their IEPs when they are involved in creating them. However, the researcher has focused the data analysis and conclusions on the perceptions of parents, teachers, and students related to student participation in their own IEP goal and objective setting instead. The analysis and interpretation has been drawn from the completion of surveys constructed by the researcher.

Limitations

The results of this study should be viewed in light of one obvious limitation that impacted the study. The limitation that was present in this study was the small sample size that participated in the completion of the surveys. The researcher only had access to one school, where she was placed in an internship. The elementary school contains third through fifth graders and is set in a rural area. The researcher believes that the study would have been much more compelling if she had access to a bigger and more widespread sample size. This might have included several districts, as well as students in grades kindergarten through sixth.

Discussion

When the researcher began to implement the study, it was planned that the study would answer the question of whether or not students who were involved in their own IEP goal and objective setting were more likely to achieve the criteria listed in their IEPs than those who were not involved. However, due to the fact that the researcher was not able to distribute the research tool (surveys) to any parents, teachers, or students who actually had experience with student involvement in IEP meetings, the focus of the study changed. Instead, the researcher was able to switch the focus of the study to the perceptions of parents, teachers, and students regarding student involvement in their own IEP goal and objective setting. After examining and analyzing the data from each group of participants, the researcher was able to draw several conclusions in regards to each group and their perceptions of student involvement in the creation of their own IEPs.

According to the literature, the researcher viewed parents, teachers, and students all play important roles in the construction of a student's IEP. The research also conveyed the idea that students do in fact play the most important role in creating their own IEPs. The study that was performed viewed three different angles of perceptions regarding student involvement. An in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data allowed the researcher to draw several conclusions and reflect on how it related to the literature that was reviewed.

The researcher came across many patterns within the groups of participants (parents, teachers, and students), but there were also several very important differences in the way that each group responded to the surveys. Parents of children in younger grades believed their students were not ready to participate in their own goal and objective setting, but parents of children in older grades were in favor of student participation. Parents' perceptions seemed to focus on the idea that the age of their children is a major determinate in whether or not they were ready to be involved in their IEP goal and objective setting. The results showed that teachers believe participation should be decided on a case-to-case basis. Teachers' perceptions seemed to be linked to a child's ability and whether or not they would be able to make a valuable contribution in their own IEP planning. Students, with the exception of one, were in favor of participating in their own IEP goal and objective setting. The single student who was not interested in being involved in his own IEP planning, responded in a way that led the researcher to believe that if he did in fact play an important role in his goal and objective setting, he might begin to feel a sense of ownership in his own IEP. In addition, he may feel his contribution is in fact

valuable. The majority of the subjects in this study were supporters of having students involved in the construction of their own IEPs.

First of all, the analysis of the parents' views regarding their children being present at their own IEP meetings, as well as involved in the construction of their goals and objectives, seemed to vary depending on the students' ages. While five parents participated in the study, two of them (who were parents of third graders) did not believe that their children were capable of expressing their own strengths and needs. Therefore, they would not benefit from being present at their own IEP meetings. Three fourth and fifth grades parents were strong supporters of having their children involved in the construction of their own IEP goals and objectives. Teachers' responses also concurred with the idea of having children present in their own IEP meetings on a case-to-case basis, depending on their age and capabilities in expressing their own strengths and needs. The researcher was able to draw a correlation between the parents' and teachers' responses, which was particularly dependent on the age of students.

Through quantitative analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v.12), the researcher found that questions one and two on the parent survey, which asked if their child had ever attended or been actively involved in one of their own IEP meetings, showed no variability. The researcher believes that this was due to the lack of presence and active involvement of students in the construction of their IEPs in this school. Parents who tended to believe students should be present at their own IEP meetings also believed it would be likely they would be more successful from being involved in their goal and objective setting. The significance

level, which was calculated to be greater than .05, proves that significance was shown with this group of participants. The researcher believes this is due to the fact that a child's age played an important factor in whether or not a parent thought they should be involved in their own IEP goal and objective setting. The researcher was able to identify a trend when viewing the age of children and their parents' responses. It was shown that parents of fourth and fifth grade students were in favor of student participation, while parents of third graders did not believe their children were old enough. In addition, more subjects may have shown significance in this section of the study.

Questions that ask whether or not students have been involved in their own IEP planning and refer to their level of involvement on the teacher survey (questions one through four) also show no variability due to the fact that none of the teachers who completed the surveys have been involved in an IEP meeting when a student was present or involved in the construction of their own IEP goals and objectives. Significance with this group was not reflected in the question that asked teachers their perceptions regarding the role that students should play in their own IEP meetings. The researcher believes that this is due to the fact that the nature of question left it to be responded to in a very broad sense. Furthermore, the teachers did actually respond with similar answers. Two teachers stated that students should be involved in their own IEP planning by expressing their strengths and needs and the third teacher stated that students should be involved in order to become more aware of what they are working towards. The researcher believes that each of these responses are fairly parallel with one another in the sense that they would all agree with one another and

the responses they each gave. However, the teachers happened to word their responses in a different way.

These results do not completely correspond with the literature that was viewed by the researcher. Mason, McGahee-Kovack, and Johnson (2004) express the importance of allowing students to lead their own IEP meetings. If the students were in fact the most important part of their own IEP meetings, then they would be viewed that way in the eyes of the parents and teachers who participated in the surveys unanimously. Although Zickel and Arnold (2001) along with Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, and Algozzine (2004), claim that students are in fact an essential aspect in their IEP planning, this is not proven true in the perceptions of some people who have children with disabilities, or work with students with disabilities. The researcher believes the negative perceptions are due to the lack of knowledge and opportunities students currently have regarding their IEPs. For this reason, the researcher believes it is important that further research be conducted in the areas of student success when they are involved in the setting of their own IEP goals and objectives.

However, a large part of the survey responses from the participants in this study did lead to an agreement with much of the literature that was viewed. Zickel and Arnold (2001) express the importance of having students understand their strengths and needs, which will lead to a better understanding of their disability. A large part of the data analysis did lead to an understanding that teachers especially do believe students should be involved in their own IEP planning specifically in order to better understand their strengths and needs. An analysis of the parents' survey responses also agreed with Zickel and Arnold (2001). Many of the parents who were

in favor of student participation in their own goal and objective setting thought it would be beneficial due to the fact that students would be more likely to achieve their goals and objectives if they were aware of what they were. Zickel and Arnold (2001) state the importance of student involvement and actually created a Self-Advocacy Circle in order to involve students in their own IEP goal and objective setting. Their main intent in creating this model was to assist students in familiarizing with and achieving their goals and objectives.

Furthermore, four out of five students who participated in this study believed that they know themselves best; therefore, they should be active participants in their own IEP meetings along with the setting of their goals and objectives. Once again, a 100% agreement among students was not present regarding their perceptions of being involved in their own IEP meetings. However, the one student who did not believe he should be present responded by saying that he is not interested in what “they” want him to do. This reflects the lack of involvement students experience regarding the construction of their IEPs. The researcher believes that it is very likely that this student highly uninformed regarding the contents and importance of his IEP. Therefore, the researcher believes that if this student took an active role in the setting of his goals and objectives, he would have more ownership and be more interested in working towards his own goals and objectives. As Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, and Algozzine (2004) mention, students are likely to become more self-confident in their ability to reach goals and objectives when they are aware of what they are. As the researcher, I very strongly agree with the fact that students becoming informed will lead to a great deal of interest and even excitement regarding their IEPs.

Students will be given more specific goals to work towards and because they would be involved in creating them, they would be much more personal to the students themselves.

Although there was no variability shown on the student survey responses, it does not mean that all of the students think alike. The lack of variability resulted due to the fact that the first seven questions on the student survey focused on students who had been involved in their own IEP goal and objective setting, and none of the students involved in the study have ever experienced taking part in the construction of their own IEPs. Significance in the group of student participants may have been reached if the researcher had an opportunity to include a larger sample size in the study.

The underlying pattern existing from the data analysis is that the majority of all teachers, parents, and students who participated in this study believe that student participation in their own IEP goal and objective setting would affect their academics positively. The responses of these participants seemed extremely enthusiastic towards the idea of involving students in their own IEPs. However, due to the fact that none of the survey participants actually had experience with student participation in the construction of their own IEPs, these are merely perceptions. In the future, the researcher is interested in performing an additional study that focuses on a larger sample size of people who have first hand experiences with student involvement in the construction of their own IEPs. It is likely that a continuation of research will result in facts that will prove the positive outcomes of student involvement in their

own IEPs. As a result, more parents, teachers, and students will support the idea of student participation in their own IEP planning.

Generalizations and Future Research

The preliminary research that has been completed at this point could be extremely useful in introducing the idea of involving students in their own IEP meetings. It is apparent that the parents, teachers, and students in this study are in favor of involving students in their own IEP planning. Therefore, this particular school has the opportunity to establish student involvement in their IEP goal and objective setting. This school might implement student involvement on a trial basis, which would be a great opportunity for further research to be conducted regarding student achievement levels when they are actively involved. The positive perceptions of parents, teachers, and students detected through this study are an essential stepping-stone to further research being conducted in the future. As the researcher in this study, it is hoped that further research will be conducted in order to determine whether or not students are actually more to achieve the criteria listed in their IEPs when they are involved in the construction on their IEPs. In order to do this, it is important that children with parents and teachers who have positive perceptions regarding student involvement in their own IEP planning are encouraged to become involved in their own IEP meetings. Following several students' involvement, a study must be conducted where the achievement levels are compared to those of students who were not involved in their IEP planning.

Summary

It is evident by the new research arising that student involvement in their IEP goal and objective setting is of critical importance in the area of special education. Students with disabilities benefit from receiving a great deal of support and encouragement in their educational experiences. Therefore, providing them with the chance to play an important role in their own IEPs would allow them to support, encourage, and empower themselves. Given the chance to empower themselves through becoming involved in the construction of their own IEPs, it is likely that students will see an overall positive impact in their academics.

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Appendix A

Student Survey

Please answer each of these questions in the space provided. You may use the back of the sheet if you need more space.

1. Are you familiar with an Individualized Education Plan?

Yes _____ No _____

2. (If yes to question 1) What is an IEP?

3. (If yes to question 1) What do you know about the writing of goals and objectives at an Individualized Education Plan meeting?

4. Have you ever attended one of your own IEP meetings?

5. (If yes to question 4) What do you remember about the meeting?

6. (If yes to questions 4) How were you involved?

7. Are you aware of the IEP educational goals and objectives upon which you are working?

8. Do you think you should be involved in setting your own IEP goals and objectives pertaining to schoolwork? Why or why not?

Informed Consent (Student)

This is a consent form that asks for a student’s signature and consent to participate in a study. If the participant chooses to sign this form they will be involved in a research project the researcher is conducting in order to complete her thesis. The project includes researching students’ success when they are, compared to when they are not involved in forming their own IEPs. The participants will be asked to fill out a survey and the researcher will also be viewing grades and IEP goals of the participant in order to complete the research. However, confidentiality will be kept at all times. The participant may refuse to answer any of the questions on the survey if they wish. However, the information that is provided will still be used if the participant chooses not to participate while the research is being conducted.

I understand that:

- 1. I will not be penalized in any way if I choose not to participate in any part of the study.
- 2. My name will remain confidential.

Student’s Signature

Date

Appendix B

Parent Survey

Please answer each of these questions in the space provided. You may use the back of the sheet if you need more space.

1. Has your child ever been present at his/her own IEP meeting? If yes, how many?

2. (If yes to question 1) Has your child been actively involved at his/her own IEP meetings? If yes, How?

3. Do you believe it is beneficial for your child to be present at its own IEP meetings? Why or why not?

4. Do you believe that your child is aware of the criteria (goals and objectives) listed in their IEP?

5. Do you believe it would be beneficial for your child to be involved in their goal and objective setting at their IEP meeting? Why or why not?

6. Do you believe that your child would be more or less likely to achieve their IEP goals and objectives if they were involved in setting them at their IEP meetings?

Informed Consent (Parent)

This study and questionnaire is being conducted in order to draw conclusions to the question: Are students more likely to achieve the criteria listed in their IEPs when they are involved in the IEP meeting along with the setting of their own goals and objectives? This research project is also being conducted in order for the researcher to complete her Master's thesis for the Department of Education at the State University of New York College at Brockport.

You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in this project. In order for you as well as your child to participate in the research, your informed consent is required. If you want to participate in the project and agree with the statements below, please sign your name in the space provided at the end. You may change your mind at any time and decide not to complete the survey without any penalty, even after you have begun the survey.

I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My confidentiality is guaranteed. My name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect me to my written survey. If any publication results from this research, I will not be identified by name.
3. There will be no personal risks due to my participation in this project.
4. My participation involves reading a written survey of 6-8 questions and answering the questions in writing. It is estimated that it will take 15 minutes to complete the survey.
5. The results of this study will be used for the completion of a Master's thesis by the primary researcher.
6. My child's grades, goals, and objectives will be viewed and kept confidential in order for the researcher to draw conclusions from the study.
7. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the investigator's office. Shredding when the research has been accepted and approved will destroy data and consent forms.

You are being asked whether or not you wish to participate in this study. If you wish to participate, and you agree with the statements above, please sign in the space provided. Remember, you may change your mind at any point and withdraw from the study.

Name of your Child

Signature of participant

Date

Appendix C
Special Educator/Administrator Survey

Please answer each of these questions in the space provided. You may use the back of the sheet if you need more space.

1. Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended, in how many of them were students present?

2. Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended, in how many of them were students actively involved?

3. Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended in how many of them did you feel that the students made a contribution to the setting of their own goals and objectives?

4. Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended in how many of them did you feel that the student made a *valuable* contribution to the setting of their own goals and objectives?

5. Do you feel that students should be present at their IEP meetings? Why or why not?

6. (If you answered yes to question 5) What role do you think students should play in their own IEP meetings?

7. On average, do you find that students are more or less successful in achieving their IEP goals and objectives when they are involved in setting them at their IEP meetings?

Informed Consent (Special Educator/Administrator)

This study and questionnaire is being conducted in order to draw conclusions to the question: Are students more likely to achieve the criteria listed in their IEPs when they are involved in the IEP meeting along with the setting of their own goals and objectives? This research project is also being conducted in order for the researcher to complete her Master's thesis for the Department of Education at the State University of New York College at Brockport.

You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in this project. In order for you to participate in the research, your informed consent is required. If you want to participate in the project and agree with the statements below, please sign your name in the space provided at the end. You may change your mind at any time and decide not to complete the survey without any penalty, even after you have begun the survey.

I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My confidentiality is guaranteed. My name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect me to my written survey. If any publication results from this research, I will not be identified by name.
3. There will be no personal risks due to my participation in this project.
4. My participation involves reading a written survey of 6-8 questions and answering the questions in writing. It is estimated that it will take 15 minutes to complete the survey.
5. The results of this study will be used for the completion of a Master's thesis by the primary researcher.
6. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the investigator's office. Shredding when the research has been accepted and approved will destroy data and consent forms.

You are being asked whether or not you wish to participate in this study. If you wish to participate, and you agree with the statements above, please sign in the space provided. Remember, you may change your mind at any point and withdraw from the study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Table 1
Parent Responses

	Parent 1	Parent 2	Parent 3	Parent 4	Parent 5
Question 1	No	No	No	No	No
Question 2	-	-	-	-	-
Question 3	Yes, perhaps they will understand more of their own needs.	Yes, I believe your child should know everything that is going on.	I think it would be beneficial, but not for the full meeting.	No, I am not sure if he is able to express his own needs. He is too young.	No, he is too young to benefit by being at the meeting. Maybe at a later time when he is old enough to understand.
Question 4	No	No	Yes	No	No
Question 5	Yes because they will have a goal to achieve and feel better about their success.	Yes because they would be more aware of what's going on and they would want to achieve more.	Yes	He doesn't know what is best for him.	He is too young.
Question 6	It is more likely as they get in the higher-grade levels.	They would be more likely to achieve their goals and objectives.	I would think yes.	As he matured it would become more beneficial.	Not at this time.

Table 2
Teacher Responses

	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3
Question 1	None	No	None
Question 2	None	No	None
Question 3	None	No	None
Question 4	None	No	None
Question 5	Case to case basis- older students going to middle school- yes!	Some cases yes and some cases no.	Possibly older children because they could make more of a contribution.
Question 6	Speak to what they feel are their strengths and what they feel they need to work on and what they plan to do.	They can sometimes verbalize their strengths and needs more clearly then we can assume.	Become more aware of what they are working towards.
Question 7	Can't answer	Don't know	Wouldn't know

Table 3
Student Responses

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Question 1	No	No	No	No	No
Question 2	-	-	-	-	-
Question 3	-	-	-	-	-
Question 4	No	No	No	No	No
Question 5	-	-	-	-	-
Question 6	-	-	-	-	-
Question 7	No	No	No	No	No
Question 8	No, It might be too much. I don't need to hear what they want me to do.	Yes, it will help me learn.	Yes because if other people pick your goals you won't know what they are. They might not know what I need.	Yes, so I can learn more.	Yes because I know what is best for me and I can help myself the most.

Table 4
Comparisons Across Groups on Survey Responses

	N	Standard Deviation	t	Significance (2- tailed)
Parents				
Question 3- Do you believe it is beneficial for your child to be present at its own IEP meetings? Why or why not?	5	.54772	2.449	.070
Question 4- Do you believe that your child is aware of the criteria listed in their IEP?	5	.44721	1.000	.374
Question 5- Do you believe it would be beneficial for your child to be involved in their goal and objective setting at their IEP meeting? Why or why not?	5	.54772	2.449	.070
Question 6- Do you believe that your child would be more or less likely to achieve their IEP goals and objectives if they were involved in setting them at their IEP meetings?	5	.54772	2.449	.070
Teachers				
Question 6- What role do you think students should play in their own IEP meetings?	3	.57735	5.000	.038*
Students				
Question 8- Do you think you should be involved in setting your own IEP goals and objectives pertaining to schoolwork? Why or why not?	5	.447	4.000	.016*

Significance levels

* p<.05

** p<.01

*** p<.001

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics by Groups on Survey Responses

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Parents			
Q1- Has your child ever been present at his/her own IEP meeting?	5	.0000	.0000
Q2- Has your child been actively involved at his/her own IEP meetings?	5	.0000	.0000
Q3- Do you believe it is beneficial for your child to be present at its own IEP meetings? Why or why not?	5	.6000	.54772
Q4- Do you believe that your child is aware of the criteria listed in their IEP?	5	.2000	.44721
Q5- Do you believe it would be beneficial for your child to be involved in their goal and objective setting at their IEP meeting? Why or why not?	5	.6000	.54772
Q6- do you believe that your child would be more or less likely to achieve their IEP goals and objectives if they were involved in setting them at their IEP meetings?	5	.6000	.54772
Teachers			
Q1- Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended, in how many of them were students present?	3	.0000	.00000
Q2- Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended, in how many of them were students actively involved?	3	.0000	.00000
Q3- Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended in how many of them did you feel that the students made a contribution to the setting of their own goals and objectives?	3	.0000	.00000
Q4- Out of the past ten IEP meetings you have attended in how many of them did you feel that the students made a <i>valuable</i> contribution to the setting of their own goals and objectives?	3	.0000	.00000
Q5- Do you feel that students should be present at their IEP meetings? Why or why not?	3	2.000	.00000
Q6- What role do you think students should play in their own meetings?	3	1.6667	.57735
Q7- On average, do you find that	3	.0000	.00000

students are more or less successful in achieving their IEP goals and objectives when they are involved in setting them at their IEP meetings?

Students		.00	.000
Q1- Are you familiar with an Individualized Education Plan?	5	.00	.000
Q2- What is an IEP?	5	.00	.000
Q3- What do you know about the writing of goals and objectives at an Individualized Education Plan meeting?	5	.00	.000
Q4- Have you ever attended one of your own IEP meetings?	5	.00	.000
Q5- What do you remember about the meeting?	5	.00	.000
Q6- How were you involved?	5	.00	.000
Q7- Are you aware of the IEP educational goals and objectives upon which you are working?	5	.00	.000
Q8- Do you think you should be involved in setting your own IEP goals and objectives pertaining to schoolwork? Why or why not?	5	.80	.447
