



Benefits of Student Involvement in Educational Planning A Literature Review

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Abstract

Although parent and student involvement are recognized as part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (IDEA, 2004), the partnership envisioned by IDEA remains inconsistent with practice (Haines et al., 2017). Student and family involvement in educational planning continues to be a weak area of IDEA compliance (Wang, Mannan, Poston, Turnbull, & Summers, 2004). Parents often report having low satisfaction with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process because of the lack of collaborative partnership with educational teams, resulting from a team's inability to implement the seven principles of partnership (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Childre & Chambers, 2005). When families are dissatisfied and believe they need to fight for services, they turn to advocacy activities as a means to improve services (Wang et al., 2004). Advocacy is one of the seven principles of partnership (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Families advocate for various reasons. If a parent believes they need to advocate because their child's needs are not being met, it may lead to less family satisfaction with IEP teams (Burke & Hodapp, 2016). Having students actively participate in their IEP meetings helps ensure the meetings are student-focused, which may prevent conflict and increase satisfaction. Although the current practice is to not involve students in their IEP meetings until they are at transition age, there are benefits of involving students when they are younger. Student involvement in the IEP helps foster a child's self-determination. Benefits of and strategies for student involvement in educational planning are discussed. Impact of student self-advocacy and student involvement in IEP planning on families is examined.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
Parent and Student Involvement as Part of IDEA	4
Family-Professional Partnerships	5
Parent Satisfaction and Conflict	9
Family Quality of Life Theory	10
Family-Professional Partnerships and the Family Quality of Life	11
Self-Determination Leads to Improved Quality of Life	11
Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Are Necessary for Student Participation in IEP Meetings	11
Definition of Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy	12
Barriers to Teaching Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy	13
Student Involvement in Educational Planning	13
Person-Centered Planning	14
Factors that Contribute to Student Involvement	14
Barriers to Student Involvement in IEPs	16
Strategies to Prepare Students to Lead Their IEP Meetings	17
Evaluating the Efficacy of Student-Led Interventions	18
Conclusion	18
References	20



Parent and Student Involvement as Part of IDEA

Parent involvement is recognized under the law that is currently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (IDEA, 2004). Parent roles have increased since the original version of the IDEA went into effect in 1975. The focus of the law has broadened to recognize the importance of all family members in educational decision-making (IDEA, 2004). However, implementation of this legislative requirement of IDEA has been slow (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004). A report by the United States Department of Education's Elementary and Secondary Education in 2008 found that family engagement is the weakest area of IDEA compliance (Wang et al., 2004). Past research has highlighted that the partnership envisioned by IDEA is still not consistent with practice (Haines et al., 2017).

In addition to parent participation, the 1997 amendment to what is now known as IDEA added a provision to ensure students were invited to attend their Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meetings when transition was being discussed. Before 1997, research showed that students rarely attended their IEP meetings (Vacc et al., 1985). IDEA (2004) took this a step further; it now contains a provision for student involvement in transition planning requiring that (a) transition goals and services reflect students' strengths, interests, and preferences; (b) transition plans reflect employment, education, training, and independent living assessments; and (c) transition services should help students achieve those goals (Bateman, n.d). Although student input is required in the transition portion of the IEP document, IDEA legislation does not mandate student participation in their IEP meetings; students can, however, participate in meetings, as appropriate, at any age (Gillespie & Turnbull, 1983). Because the law only discusses student involvement in the context of transition planning, transition is often the sole focus of student involvement.

IDEA (2004) leads professionals, students, and families toward student outcomes of (a) equal opportunity, (b) independent living, (c) economic self-sufficiency, and (d) full participation (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2015). Part B of IDEA (2004) regulates the appropriate education of children between the ages of 3 and 21 and states that every child receiving special education services has the right to an IEP. Part C of IDEA (2004) is also individualized toward the student, but it provides for an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). Although both IEPs and IFSPs are individualized, an IFSP is family-focused and uses the term family, whereas the IEP uses the term parent (IDEA, 2004). The use of the term "parent" is too narrow in the discussions about partnership with educational teams. Therefore, the term "family" will be used in this paper. In some cases, the term "parent" is still used because it is referring to specific research focused on parents.



The use of the term “family” recognizes the importance of family systems theory, whereby members of the family are interconnected (Turnbull et al., 2015). Family systems theory is a framework that describes the relationships and connections between family members (Turnbull et al., 2015, p. 30). In this theory, what happens to one family member affects the entire family. The term family refers to “two or more people who regard themselves as family and who perform some functions that families typically perform” (Turnbull et al., 2015, p. 30). In this definition of family, it is less about the relationship by blood or marriage and more about the functions that the family member plays (Turnbull et al., 2015). In an educational planning context, parents and students are mentioned in IDEA, but other family members also have important roles.

Family-Professional Partnerships

Family-professional partnerships are a key support for families as they work with IEP teams to meet the needs of their child (Haines et al., 2017). Partnerships are necessary for students to receive a fair and appropriate education (Newman, 2005). Student achievement has been shown to improve when families are equal partners of the IEP teams (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In an educational context, partnership refers to a collaborative relationship between families and professionals to make decisions that seek to improve student outcomes (Turnbull et al., 2015). Many factors influence whether partnership is possible, including the quality of current and past relationships, whether family members trust the other members of the team, if families believe their child's needs are being met, and if parents believe professionals genuinely care about and know their child (Nelson, Summers, & Turnbull, 2004).

Collaboration is critical for a successful partnership (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Hedeem, Moses, & Peter, 2011). Cook and Friend (2010) defined collaboration as having mutual goals, shared responsibility for critical decisions, and shared accountability for outcomes (Hedeem et al., 2011). In the context of educational planning, collaboration can help a team work collectively toward the mutual goal of helping the student. Parents and professionals can both benefit from working together collaboratively to support individualized student needs (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Hedeem et al., 2011). Increased family involvement leads to better student outcomes in the areas of school engagement, academic performance, social adjustment, and independence (Newman, 2005).

Family-professional partnership principles. The landmark study by Blue-Banning et al. (2004), provided six interrelated themes that are indicators of a collaborative family-professional partnership:

1. communication,
2. commitment,
3. equality,
4. competence,



5. respect, and
6. trust.

Turnbull et al. (2015) later found advocacy to be a seventh indicator of partnership. Successfully implementing these seven principles leads to increased collaboration and strong family-professional partnership (Kyzar, Brady, Summers, Haines, & Turnbull, 2016). In the next section, each of the seven principles is discussed, using supportive literature.

Communication. Communication has been found to enhance parent satisfaction (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). It is a way for team members to establish trust, show respect, and confer equity with families (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 173). Effective communication refers to both quantity and quality of communication; however, parents often concentrate on quality (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Parents desire positive, understandable, and respectful communication (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Parents in Latham's (2002, p. 92) study indicated they wanted "more communication, clearer communication, and more frequent communication." Blue-Banning et al. (2004) proposed five actions that are necessary for effective communication:

1. being friendly,
2. listening,
3. being clear,
4. being honest, and
5. providing and coordinating information gathering.

Parents in the Blue-Banning et al. (2004) study emphasized the value of listening to what the other person had to say and stated that communication goes both ways. Parents indicated that they often felt like they were communicated with "too late" and would appreciate more timely information and feedback (Latham, 2002). Communication is critical during IEP meetings but the team should also maintain that positive contact throughout the year (Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000). One strategy for managing communication throughout the year is for team members to create an individualized communication plan for each family.

Commitment. Commitment in the context of partnership means that families believe the team members have loyalty to their child (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Professionals can demonstrate commitment by being sensitive to emotional needs and by being accessible (Turnbull et al., 2015). Parents appreciate when team members are flexible in scheduling meeting times (Nelson et al., 2004). Parents want team members to approach work with their child as "more than a job" and expect team members to understand the unique needs of their child (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Parents appreciate when team members go out of their way to know their family but recognize that this commitment cannot negatively impact a professional's quality of life (Nelson et al., 2004). Families want professionals to be committed to working with their child.

Equality. Equality in educational partnership refers to shared power in decision-making and IEP implementation (Turnbull et al., 2015). Inviting families to IEP meetings does not necessarily



translate to equality in these meetings (Martin et al., 2006a). Equality also refers to providing creative options whenever possible instead of being inflexible (Turnbull et al., 2015). Although families are invited to IEP meetings, parents believe their opinions do not matter (Burke & Hodapp, 2016). Parents report that decisions are made before the meetings, IEP documents are created in advance, meetings are a formality, and that they are excluded from important conversations (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Fish, 2008). In meetings, equality can be shown by being willing to explore all options, validating other members' thoughts and suggestions, and empowering others (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). In the context of parent advocacy, one way to increase equality in meetings is for team members to value the knowledge that parents bring to the table (Kervick, 2017).

Competency. In social cognition research, respect was found to depend on level of competence (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). In an educational context, if families believe team members are competent, they may show more respect for them. Professional competency means knowing how to provide an appropriate education to students, setting high expectations for the student, and always continuing to learn (Turnbull et al., 2015). Competency can come in the form of formal professional development or through interactions with families and students (Turnbull et al., 2015). Parents appreciate team members who keep current in their field, have high expectations of their children, and who can “make things happen” (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Families do not expect team members to have all the answers (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Parents indicated that they appreciate competent professionals who are not afraid to admit what they do not know and who are committed to researching answers (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Competency entails valuing the knowledge that families and other team members hold that will help the team meet individual student needs (Wang et al., 2004). Competency also requires team members to listen to students as they self-advocate for their needs.

Respect. Respect in partnership means that team members will treat each other with esteem during all interactions (Turnbull et al., 2015). Part of respect is honoring cultural diversity, affirming student strengths (and not focusing on weaknesses), and treating students and families with dignity (Turnbull et al., 2015). For families to believe the team respects them, they must also believe the team values their child as a person rather than focusing on their disability (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Strategies for showing respect include: (a) calling parents by their last names unless told otherwise, (b) being on time for meetings, (c) acknowledging the efforts of families, and (d) always showing common courtesy (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Parents report that team member empathy and compassion help families to feel respected (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). For students, being properly trained to participate in IEP meetings contributed to them feeling more respected at IEP meetings (Martin et al., 2004).

Trust. Trust in partnership means having confidence that the team members are acting in the best interests of the student and that they will keep their word (Turnbull et al., 2015). To create trust with families, professionals need to be reliable, use sound judgment, maintain confidentiality, and have confidence in their reliability and judgments. Trust is seen to be the



foundation of effective partnership because how the other partnership principles are carried out influences the extent to which families have trust (Turnbull et al., 2015). Trust must be in place for a collaborative family-professional partnership to be successful (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Parents report that when they trust professionals, they spend less energy on advocacy and progress monitoring (Stoner & Angell, 2006).

Advocacy. Families perceive advocacy as important to family-professional partnerships (Wang et al., 2004). Families, professionals, and students are all important advocates in the educational process. Because advocacy is a primary focus of this paper, it will be discussed in more detail than the other principles of partnership. Advocacy is defined as “speaking out and taking action in pursuit of a cause.” (Turnbull et al., 2015, p. 178). In an educational context, advocacy refers to speaking out on behalf of a student. An effective advocate prevents problems, documents problems, forms alliances, creates win-win solutions, and is alert for opportunities to advocate (Turnbull et al., 2015). Burke (2013) discusses how advocacy is problem-oriented. First, the issue must be identified so resources can be gathered to solve the problem (Burke, 2013). Professional advocacy is important to families because it demonstrates commitment (Turnbull et al., 2015). If families believe that professionals are committed advocates for their families and children, they are more satisfied with the partnership (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

Parents are essential educational advocates for students with disabilities (Burke & Hodapp, 2016). Throughout history, parent advocacy has played a significant role in making inclusion possible for students with disabilities. Wolfensberger (1977), in early disability rights literature, described advocacy as acting on behalf of someone else to make their strengths, preferences, and needs known. Some argue that advocacy is what was meant by the term parent participation in IDEA (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1982), whereas others argue that partnership was envisioned.

Parent advocacy is complicated because there are many reasons for advocacy efforts. As previously mentioned, advocacy is one of the seven principles of partnership that helps build a trusting partnership. If family satisfaction with partnership is low, families see advocacy as an obligation and a means to improve services (Wang et al., 2004). Parents who felt like they needed to engage in high levels of advocacy reported having less satisfaction with their partnership with IEP teams (Burke & Hodapp, 2016). Conversely, if parents believe that partnerships are effective, advocacy may be less important to them (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Wang et al., 2004). Parents often wish they did not have to fight for services or gather information that educational teams were not providing (Wang et al., 2004).

Parents reported increased stress if they felt like they needed to participate in advocacy activities related to improving services (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2004). When a student has more complex needs and when an IEP team is large, families often play the role of “case manager,” bringing together all of the information about the student (Kervick, 2017). Parents often approach educational planning with intuition about their child's needs, and have



reported that advocacy based upon intuition, or gut instinct, is not always successful (Trainor, 2010). A more effective approach to advocacy is for families to become "disability experts," which may help those families who believe professionals aren't giving them the information they need to make good choices for their children (Trainor, 2010). Parents who employ a "disability expert" approach to advocacy are often connected to other parents with children who have similar disabilities (Trainor, 2010). Connections with other families help some parents approach advocacy as a "strategist." (Trainor, 2010.) In Trainor's (2010) study, parents who were considered strategists reportedly strengthened their knowledge of special education by combining it with the knowledge of other families who had shared experiences. Strategists are often very knowledgeable about special education law and are clear on what their role is within the IEP team (Trainor, 2010). These strategist families garner support and strength from connecting with other families (Kervick, 2017).

It can be emotional for parents to share their knowledge and advocate for their children. To complicate things more, parent knowledge and advocacy are often not valued by IEP teams (Kervick, 2017). Depending on the level of advocacy efforts, stress can take an emotional toll on families (Kervick, 2017). Strategies to help mitigate this emotional toll are making sure that parents are focusing on their self-care, that parents know how to step back and regroup, and that parents can self-regulate (Kervick, 2017).

Parent Satisfaction and Conflict

Parents often report having low satisfaction with the IEP process (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008; Fish, 2008; Rosenbaum, 2001). Families say that being invited to participate in their child's education is not enough; they want to be equal decision-makers (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Hedeem et al., 2011; Mapp & Kuttner, 2013; Turnbull et al., 2015). The intent of the IDEA law is to promote active parent participation but parents do not always believe they are equal partners of the education team (Hedeem et al., 2011). Although parent participation is reportedly high, parents often believe that their participation in IEP meetings is passive and that their input is not valued (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Esquivel et al., 2008; Fish, 2008; Garriott et al., 2000).

Parents have concerns about the IEP process itself (Hedeem et al., 2011) and believe the process is impersonal, emotional, and deficit-based (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Parents report frustration that IEPs are often developed before the meeting, which contributes to them having a passive role in meetings and believing their input is not valued (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Esquivel et al., 2008; Fish, 2008). Parents may believe that there is a power imbalance in meetings, forcing them to take a passive role (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Lack of parent knowledge about the special education system also leads to frustration, as does the use of educational jargon (Fish, 2008; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Parents often believe that, because of the excessive paperwork, the focus of the meeting is more procedural and less collaborative (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Parents report dissatisfaction when there is no follow through and when things do not get done



(Rosenbaum, 2001). The lack of professional accountability is frustrating to families, especially when it leads to a lack of student progress on IEP goals.

An IEP team's inability to implement the seven principles of partnership often results in negative experiences in IEP meetings and conflict between parents and professionals, which can lead to due process hearings (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Conflict can result from a lack of collaboration between families and the rest of the IEP team, or from a family believing as if their child's needs are not being met. IDEA (2004) states that parents must be involved in the IEP development process but that is not always the case (Bateman & Linden, 2006; IDEA, 2004; Yell, 2006). When conflict occurs in IEP teams, it could mean that the IEP meeting focus has shifted from the student to unproductive topics that lead to disagreements. Participants in Vick's (2017) study reported that increased student involvement in IEP meetings had a significant reductive impact on conflict.

Transition is another source of litigation in special education law (Romberg, 2011). IDEA (2004) mandates student involvement in the transition process, but research indicates a lack of compliance. Powers (2005) found that, overall, transition plans were of low quality. The most common IEP procedural violation is IEPs with no transition goals (Epstein, 1992; Powers, 2005). In fact, Powers (2005) found, in a review of 399 IEP transition documents, that transition goals were missing from 24 percent of IEPs sampled.

Family Quality of Life Theory

Family quality of life (FQOL) is a concept that has been shown to lead to improved outcomes for children with disabilities and their families (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Kyzar et al. (2016) found that satisfaction with partnership predicted family quality of life in their study of families with children who are deaf-blind. Poston et al. (2003, p. 314) defined family quality of life "as the conditions under which the family's needs are met, family members enjoy their life together as a family, and family members have the chance to do things that are important to them." This paper is guided by the family quality of life theory (Zuna, Summers, Turnbull, Hu, & Xu, 2010, p. 14):

Systems, policies, and programs directly impact individual and family-level supports, services, and practices. Individual member concepts (i.e., demographics, characteristics, and beliefs) and family-unit concepts (i.e., dynamics and characteristics) are direct predictors of family quality of life. Singly or combined, the model predictors result in a family quality of life outcome that produces new family strengths, needs, and priorities that re-enter the model as a new input resulting in a continuous feedback loop throughout the life cycle.

Family quality of life consists of five domains that can be measured by the Beach Center Family Quality of Life Scale (Hoffman, Marquis, Poston, Summers, & Turnbull, 2006):



1. family interaction—relationships among family members,
2. parenting—activities that adult family members do to help children grow and develop,
3. emotional well-being—the aspects of family life that address the emotional needs of family members,
4. physical/material well-being—the aspects of family life that address the physical needs of family members, and
5. supports for a family member with a disability—informal and formal supports to benefit the family member with a disability .

Family-Professional Partnerships and the Family Quality of Life

Family involvement in educational planning may lead to an improved quality of life for the family (Summers et al., 2007). When families are engaged in a collaborative partnership, they are likely to be more empowered, knowledgeable, and motivated, which could lead to increased family quality of life (Wang et al., 2004). If parents are not treated as equal partners, they experience more stress and this negatively impacts their family quality of life (Wang et al., 2004).

Blue-Banning et al. (2004) also reported similar findings: the quality of a family's partnership with their child's service providers was a critical element of their family's quality of life. Professionals play a key role in enhancing the quality of life for both individuals and families by supporting the entire family.

Self-Determination Leads to Improved Quality of Life

Student involvement in educational planning can lead them to be more self-determined, which may lead to increased individual quality of life. A significant finding in self-determination research is that self-determination contributes to improved individual quality of life (Lee, Palmer, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2006; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). As previously stated in family systems theory, impacts to one member of a family may extend to the rest of the family (Turnbull et al., 2015). Because individual quality of life directly impacts family quality of life, promoting self-determination in children with disabilities improves a child's quality of life and the quality of life for their family (Lee et al., 2006). The focus on the entire family is essential (Turnbull et al., 2015).

Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy Skills Are Necessary for Student Participation in IEP Meetings

Self-determination and self-advocacy skills help students with disabilities take responsibility for their lives (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Research has shown that self-determination leads to better in-school and post-school outcomes (Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2012; Lee et al., 2006; Cho, Wehmeyer, & Kingston, 2011). Self-advocacy and self-determination skills help students participate meaningfully in their IEP meetings (Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004b). Students, however, must be taught these skills so they can be involved in their educational planning meetings. Teaching students to actively participate in their IEP meetings and



to monitor goal achievement are successful strategies for fostering self-determination and self-advocacy skills (Test et al., 2004b).

Although promoting self-determination among students with disabilities who are of transition age is essential (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012), there is also value in teaching these skills to elementary-age students. Learning self-determination skills early in life helps students with disabilities become self-determined young adults, which in turn helps them to meaningfully participate in their educational planning (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2000; Wehmeyer, Sands, Doll, & Palmer, 1997). Teaching the skills that prepare students to be more involved in their educational planning is an efficient way to promote self-determination (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003).

Collaboration between families and educators aimed at fostering self-determination is critical. When families and professionals partner to teach self-determination skills, the efforts are more likely to be successful (Lee et al., 2006). Collaboration is equally important when preparing students to actively participate in their IEP meetings. Goal setting and other self-determination skills are typically first learned at home, making family vital to the self-determination learning process (Lee et al., 2006; Wehmeyer, Morningstar, & Husted, 1999).

Definition of Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy

Self-determination is important for students to become causal agents in their own lives. As the practice of inclusion has been implemented, it has driven research focused on how students with disabilities can be causal agents in their own lives. The psychological construct of self-determination is relevant to students with disabilities because they are at a higher risk for overdependence and a quality of life that is more determined by others and less determined by the individual (Wilton & MacCuspie, 2017).

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one's strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective as essential to self-determination. When acting by these skills and attitudes, individuals have a greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults. (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 2.)

If students with disabilities can learn to be self-determined, they may be better equipped to take control of decisions that impact their futures.

Self-advocacy is one of the characteristic elements of self-determined behavior as outlined by Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes (1998). Because students with disabilities are at risk of overprotection by those who are in positions of authority, self-advocacy skills are vital (Wilton & MacCuspie, 2017). Developing leadership skills is an essential activity for fostering self-determination, and training in self-advocacy promotes the leadership skills students need to



participate in their IEP meetings. Students who participate in their IEP meetings fosters empowerment and builds on self-determination skills.

Barriers to Teaching Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy

Special educators value self-determination and self-advocacy instruction but there are barriers to teaching it (Cho et al., 2011, 2012). Agran, Snow, & Swaner (1999) found that although middle and high school teachers saw self-determination as important, only about half included self-determination goals in IEPs. Self-determination goals were more frequently found in IEPs for middle and high school students than in IEPs for elementary school students (Agran et al., 1999). The most commonly reported barriers to implementing interventions that promote self-determination are: (a) more urgent needs, (b) insufficient time, (c) lack of curricula, and (d) lack of training (Cho et al., 2011, 2012). It is often challenging to infuse self-determination activities in school environments because of limited time and conflicting priorities. One way to promote self-determination is to prepare students to be meaningfully involved in their IEP meetings (Test et al., 2004b).

Student Involvement in Educational Planning

Student involvement in educational planning is essential because it may help the team stay student-focused. Parents report being more satisfied with the results of IEP meetings when students are involved, which potentially leads to less litigation (Test et al., 2004a). If students are involved in their IEP meetings, it is more likely that IEPs will be more individualized and the goals will be more meaningful. IEP goals must be individualized, and IEP teams should personalize goals and avoid predetermined goals (Lake, 2002). IEP individualization is easier when the focus is on the student and when students are involved in the discussions themselves.

Although there are known benefits to student involvement, there are also barriers. The student role in educational planning is often unclear to meeting participants (Lehmann, Bassett, & Sands, 1999; Martin et al., 2004). Some professionals believe it is not appropriate for students to attend their IEP meetings, especially when transition is not being discussed. Professionals may be hesitant to include the student if they think the meeting will be focused on deficits. However, this is precisely why students need to be involved in their IEP meetings. When students are involved, the meeting tends to be more about strengths, needs, and interests and less about deficits (Martin et al., 2004); it is easier for the meeting to stay student-focused. Martin et al. (2004) reported that parents felt they had a better understanding of the reasons for the meeting when students participated because the meeting remained focused on the student.

The level and type of disability also affect teacher perceptions and is a barrier to student involvement in educational planning. Wehmeyer, Agran & Hughes (2000) found that teachers did not teach self-determination to students with cognitive impairments because they perceived these students would not benefit. All students can participate in their educational planning, with appropriate adaptations or accommodations (Hawbaker, 2007). Although participation may look



different for each student, all students can work on self-determination and self-advocacy with supports.

The current practice is that students are not invited to attend their IEP meetings until they are of the age where a formal transition plan is incorporated into the IEP document. Even then, student attendance rates are low. In a 2012 study using NLTS2 data, only 49.6 percent of students aged 11 to 14 indicated that they had attended a transition IEP meeting (Wagner et al., 2012). Wagner et al. (2012) also found that levels of participation varied based on the age of the student; younger students were more likely to have limited participation in meetings. Studies have also shown that students sometimes do not participate at the maximum extent possible because they need additional training (Martin et al., 2006b). Early learning of self-determination and IEP meeting skills can prepare students for involvement in their IEP meetings.

Person-Centered Planning

Person-centered planning is one practice that leads to self-advocacy and self-determination and can be used, even when students are young, to help them participate in their IEP meetings. In a person-centered process, a facilitator leads the meeting to ensure feedback from all participants (Hagner, Helm, & Butterworth, 1996). This helps parents and students identify goals and desires for the future. When implementing person-centered planning, it is essential to maintain a positive focus (Hagner et al., 1996). Professionals, students, and parents reported higher satisfaction with the IEP process after person-centered planning because the meetings were more student-focused (Flannery et al., 2000; Miner & Bates, 1997). After person-centered planning, parents experienced a higher level of involvement in IEP meetings (Miner & Bates, 1997).

Student-centered planning has been shown to improve collaboration and communication (Childre & Chambers, 2005). Childre and Chambers (2005) found that student-centered IEP planning improved family satisfaction and increased collaboration because the resulting IEP meetings included more discussion of future goals. Parents indicated they felt they were able to share their hopes and dreams for the first time, and that more family/student input was considered as a result (Childre & Chambers, 2005).

Factors that Contribute to Student Involvement

Students should feel welcome at their IEP meetings. Findings from a study by Whitney-Thomas & Timmons (1998) showed that team members could facilitate active student involvement in meetings by employing the following strategies:

- speaking directly to the student,
- verifying the meaning of student answers when necessary,
- speaking at a level that is understandable to the student,
- being patient in waiting for a student response,
- being aware of and using student accommodations in meetings,
- allowing the student lead, and



- keeping a positive tone at the meeting.

Use of facilitators can help increase student involvement because many of the meeting management strategies facilitators use are those that also promote student involvement (Test et al., 2004a).

Elementary student involvement. Research shows positive outcomes when younger students participate in their IEP meetings (Hackmann, Kenworthy, & Nibbelink, 1998; Kroeger, Leibold, & Ryan, 1999; Zirkel & Arnold, 2001). One positive outcome is that students are better prepared for transition planning. In a study by Danneker & Bottge (2009), notable changes occurred in IEP meetings when elementary students were involved: (a) meetings were more student-focused, (b) self-determination skills were fostered by students taking on a leadership role in meetings, and (c) the IEP team engaged in collaborative problem-solving.

Although many families and other IEP team members did not initially recognize the value of having young children involved in their own educational planning, when they saw what was possible, they were proud to see the student take on a leadership role (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). Students in Danneker & Bottge's (2009) study indicated that they would welcome the opportunity to provide meaningful input on their goals. The students also stated that they wanted to be involved in any meeting if they were the focus because it would allow them to better understand their accommodations, modifications, services, and supports (Danneker & Bottge, 2009).

Barriers to active elementary student engagement included: (a) the case manager of the IEP being more focused on legal aspects of the document than having a collaborative student-centered meeting, (b) a lack of team awareness of self-determination skills, and (c) the inability to prepare students to actively participate in their meetings (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). Another barrier is a lack of self-determination instruction in elementary school. In a study by Cho et al. (2011), researchers found that if teachers did not believe an intervention would help students be successful in elementary school, they did not place much value on it. Some study participants indicated they didn't see the value in teaching self-determination because they thought that self-determination would only help students prepare for middle school and transition. They could not see the connection to how learning of self-determination skills earlier could better prepare students for transition planning in these later years. Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine (2004) found that if teachers did not see students as involved and capable of participating in the IEP process, they were less likely to teach those students how to be more self-determined. These perceptions contribute to why more teachers aren't teaching self-determination to elementary-age students (Cho et al., 2011).

Transition planning. Because student participation is mandated by law for students ages 16 and older (IDEA, 2004), most studies have focused on the student participation in transition planning (Cawthon & Caemmerer, 2014; Wagner et al., 2012). A study by Wagner et al. (2012) found that certain characteristics help explain differences in parent and student participation



and parent satisfaction during transition. These characteristics are demographics, parent involvement, parent expectations and perceptions, previous experiences, and features of the instructional program (Wagner et al., 2012).

In a national online survey of 56 parents of children who are deaf or hard of hearing, conducted as part of a larger needs-based assessment of pepnet2, Cawthon & Caemmerer (2014) looked at parent involvement and parent expectations during transition. The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (2011) found parent involvement and parent expectations to be evidence-based predictors of post-secondary transition outcomes (Cawthon & Caemmerer, 2014). Cawthon and Caemmerer (2014) found that parent involvement contributed to successful academic and career outcomes for deaf and hard of hearing students. Parents positively rated their IEP process experiences and held high expectations for their child's future (Cawthon & Caemmerer, 2014).

Barriers to Student Involvement in IEPs

A discrepancy remains between believed and actual observed levels of student participation, possibly due to a lack of clarity about the student role in these meetings or a lack of understanding of the “intent” of student participation (Martin et al., 2004). Students often demonstrate low levels of engagement in the meetings, perhaps because the meeting structure does not encourage student engagement; student involvement is mostly passive (Martin et al., 2004). Students continue to have low opinions of IEP meetings, primarily when the IEP team views the student's role as passive (Martin et al., 2004). There are benefits to students taking on a leadership role that is appropriate based on their age and ability. However, age and ability are often seen as barriers.

In a study conducted by Whitney-Thomas & Timmons (1998), barriers to student involvement included the use of jargon, third person language, and patronizing language. Professionals can also get too concerned with the IEP document process and forget about the need to collaborate and focus on the student. To implement student-led IEP meetings, the obstacles to overcome are:

- lack of time to train students in how to be involved in their educational planning,
- lack of student motivation,
- a student's disability level,
- case manager fear that they will lose control of the meeting,
- difficulty implementing change especially if no one else in the district is involving students, and
- lack of administrator support (Hawbaker, 2007).

It takes IEP team commitment to overcome obstacles to involving students in their educational planning. Even if there is a perceived lack of time to train students, the training should be prioritized (Hawbaker, 2007). Training does not have to take a long time and can be done in stages. Students can learn the necessary skills in as few as four to six sessions over seven weeks



(Mason, McGahee-Kovac, & Johnson, 2004). Sessions can be phased to focus on the different necessary skills, such as goal setting, planning, self-evaluation, mediation, public speaking, self-advocacy, and IDEA law (Martin et al., 2006a). If student motivation is the issue, this is all the more reason that students must be involved in their IEP meetings. Some students may not be able to participate at the same level as other students so creative adaptations may be necessary (Hawbaker, 2007). Although the law indicates that students should participate "whenever appropriate," Wehmeyer argues that "whenever appropriate means always" (Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 4). Meeting dynamics change when students are involved. Although this may seem like a loss of control for other IEP members, it might be a good thing because it could mean that the student is becoming more self-determined (Hawbaker, 2007). Just because no one else in the district is involving students in their IEP meetings and there is a lack of administrative support, it is worthwhile to do what is best for students (Hawbaker, 2007).

Strategies to Prepare Students to Lead Their IEP Meetings

Students who are not adequately trained to participate in their IEP meetings can be disillusioned with their education (Lehmann et al., 1999). Lack of student involvement in educational planning may be because students have not received systematic self-determination training to prepare them (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006). Martin et al. (2006b) reported that students seldom exhibit leadership behavior in IEP meetings without meeting participation and leadership skills training. Students must be taught self-determination skills and IEP management meeting management skills. Training does not need to take a lot of time; elementary-age students can be prepared to participate in their IEP meetings in as little as 120 minutes (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). With proper training, students can feel like they are being heard for the first time in an IEP meeting, and participating in IEP meetings can be a positive experience (Johnson, Serrano, & Veit, 2013; Quann et al., 2015). However, students are often unprepared to attend their IEP meetings, having received no training (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998). Wagner et al. (2012) found that students who receive formal instruction in IEP meetings are more likely to attend their transition planning meetings. In 2002, only 65 percent of secondary students reported receiving instruction in IEPs and transition planning (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). Students who do not have enough training may perceive their participation in IEP meetings as not meaningful (Lehmann et al., 1999). Wagner et al. (2012) found the same to be valid for transition planning.

There is more than one way to train students to actively participate and lead their IEP meetings. Published curricula and person-centered planning techniques have been found to be effective ways to increase student involvement (Test et al., 2004b). Role-playing is an essential component of many of these curricula (Test et al., 2004b). Teaching self-advocacy and self-determination skills is the foundation for training students to actively participate in their IEP meetings. Age and maturity, as well as ability and comfort level, are important considerations when preparing students to be involved in their IEP meetings (Vick, 2017). Collaboration with families is also essential when teaching students the skills needed to take an active role in their educational planning.



One commonly used, field-tested intervention is the Self-Directed IEP model (Martin, Marshall, Maxson, & Jerman, 1996). This model, part of the ChoiceMaker curriculum, is an evidence-based practice used to teach self-determination skills that prepare students to participate in their IEPs. Not only is the Self-Directed IEP model acceptable, it is successful (Allen, Smith, Test, Flowers, & Wood, 2001; Martin et al., 2006b; Snyder, 2002). Its curriculum has been shown to be successfully modified for use with students of varied abilities (Allen et al., 2001).

The format of the Self-Directed IEP teaches self-determination in a way that increases students' knowledge of the IEP process (Arndt et al., 2006). Martin et al. (2006b) found that student participation in IEP meetings increased after successfully implementing the Self-Directed IEP. Similarly, Allen et al. (2001) found that students who were taught IEP skills using the Self-Directed IEP were able to improve their meeting leadership skills. Students were better able to report their interests, abilities, and limitations, options, and goals after the training (Allen et al., 2001). Students were also better able to make meeting introductions, review past goals, discuss future goals, and efficiently close meetings (Snyder, 2002).

Evaluating the Efficacy of Student-Led Interventions

Understanding the personal strengths of a student has been found to be more important than which curriculum an educator uses (Jones, 2006). Jones (2006) found that teachers who have been successful in teaching self-determination realized that incorporating a daily self-determination curriculum into everyday life was not hard to do and that it was easiest to infuse the curriculum into other subjects. Teaching students the skills to lead their IEP meetings is not time-consuming but teachers often do not think they are prepared to train students on how to be involved in their IEPs (Vick, 2017). Once they receive training, teachers reported that even young children could be taught to be involved in educational decision-making and that teaching student empowerment can be contagious (Jones, 2006).

Conclusion

The partnership envisioned by IDEA (2004) remains inconsistent with practice. Although IDEA (2004) mandates student involvement only in transition planning, IDEA (2004) includes another provision designed to promote earlier active student involvement in educational planning. Student involvement in educational planning has been researched for decades but student involvement continues to revolve around transition today. There are documented benefits to students who participate in their IEP meetings at a young age; nevertheless, students remain passive participants in meetings—if they are invited at all. Student-led IEPs have been established as an evidence-based practice for fostering self-determination.

A family's role may change as a student becomes a stronger self-advocate and becomes more involved in educational planning. The family may not have to advocate as frequently for services and supports for their child if the child can self-advocate. It is appropriate for students to take



on a leadership role in the educational planning process because they are likely to be in the best position to give feedback on their goals. If students can be self-advocates in educational planning, family members may be able to shift their focus to a supporting role: supporting their child in their student-led IEP efforts and fostering self-determination and self-advocacy. The family systems framework identifies and defines different functions that families perform to meet individual and collective needs (Turnbull, Summers, & Brotherson, 1984). One of the many functions of the family is education. If children can be more actively involved in educational decision-making, it may free up the time of other family members for other family functions, which may have a positive impact on family quality of life.

Although research documents the importance of student participation in IEP meetings, there is a gap in research focused on how families are impacted. Future research is needed to study (a) if student involvement in educational planning leads to increased family satisfaction with partnership, (b) if family quality of life increases as a result of transferring the advocacy role from families to students and the effects of this shift in advocacy role, (c) how students gain knowledge to self-advocate and actively participate in their IEP meetings, and (d) how families perceive their role as advocate in relation to their children and other team members.

Having students actively involved in their IEP meetings helps ensure IEP meetings are student-focused, which may prevent conflict and increase family satisfaction. Student involvement also may help students be more aware of the services and supports available to them. There are documented benefits to involving students in educational planning, even at a young age. In practice, however, students are often not invited to their IEP meetings until they are at transition age, or they are not invited at all. Student involvement in IEP planning helps foster a child's self-determination, which leads to increased individual quality of life and family quality of life. In this paper, benefits of and strategies for student involvement in educational planning were discussed. The impact of student self-advocacy and student involvement in IEP planning on families was also considered in this paper.



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