EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF
THE INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN (IEP) PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

The diagnosis of learning disabilities in children has increased nearly two-fold in the past decade. The Individual Education Plan (IEP) process can be daunting for parents, students, and educators alike. For every member of the IEP team (classroom teacher, special education teacher, administrator, parent, child), it is important to know that while there are difficulties within the IEP process, these challenges can be overcome with careful planning and consideration. Through review of numerous scholarly articles and studies in educational databases, this paper identifies three major challenges of the IEP process along with how these challenges can be overcome. First, while parents are considered a valued member of the IEP team, families can find IEP meetings to be intimidating and confusing. By understanding the grieving process of having a child diagnosed with a learning disability, educators can maintain open communication with parents and provide a welcoming environment to discuss their child’s strengths and needs. In addition, students can also find the IEP process to be confusing and frustrating. It is important that students be included from the onset of the IEP process, despite their young age or grade. Finally, an IEP is only as strong as its goals and targets. IEPs that provide measurable, functional, and understandable goals/targets will provide the most benefits to a student with a learning disability/exceptionality. This paper will ultimately serve as an important tool for educators and parents looking to navigate the IEP process.
Introduction

The following scenario is fictional, although it encompasses the experiences and emotions involved by all of the major players in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process in Ontario. Although the scenario may not be representative of every single student’s IEP experience, it will guide readers through the IEP process and provide a general overview of how it works. Jack is a Grade 3 student who has struggled with reading from a very young age. Jack’s classroom teacher is concerned about his academic performance, and presents her concerns to the principal and special education resource teacher (SERT). They agree that Jack would benefit from a psycho-educational assessment. They explain to Jack’s parents that this type of assessment will analyze his academic skills and psychological aspects of learning. The assessment will consist of an interview, observations, review of school records, standardized tests of aptitude and abilities, generation of written report and discussion of results with the parents. Jack’s parents agree to the assessment, as they are desperate to help their struggling son in any way possible. The psycho-educational assessment finds that Jack has a learning disability in reading. His parents are experiencing an array of emotions, as Jack has been identified by the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) as being exceptional and would benefit from the development of an Individual Education Plan.

The purpose of this paper is multifold: It is intended to identify challenges in the IEP process in Ontario and assist educators in overcoming these challenges; It is intended to educate the public about the Individual Education Plan process in Ontario; and finally, it is intended to further facilitate the involvement of parents and students in the IEP process.

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Challenges of the IEP Process

process. First, a general overview will be provided of what an Individual Education Plan is and the different steps outlined by the Ministry of Education of how an IEP should be developed. Next, a literature review will present each of the three challenges in the following format: identify the challenge, provide information as to why it is a challenge, and identify strategies to overcome the challenge. First, the challenge of parental involvement will be discussed, including the feelings of vulnerability and intimidation during IEP meetings. Next, the challenge of student involvement will echo the parental sentiment, including the student’s frustration and confusion of the process. Finally, the importance of quality IEP targets/goals will be discussed, emphasizing the importance of meeting the needs of the student. It should be noted that the literature review encompasses a number of studies from different countries, as Canadian research on this topic is limited and it is important to consider a global educational perspective. Thus, while the IEP process can include challenges to parental involvement, student involvement, and quality goals/targets, careful planning and consideration by the IEP team can elicit a successful educational journey for all.

It should be noted that the IEP process is integrative in itself. It draws on a number of considerations when developing a plan for a student, such as the student’s strengths, interests and needs in both academics and behaviour; the considerations of the parents; the considerations of the student; and the observations of the classroom teacher and Special Educator. All of the information, considerations, and observations must be integrated into one document that sets out a plan for the student’s educational journey.

Thus, an interdisciplinary approach has been chosen for this research and will be presented as a discourse analysis. This paper brings together a number of theories from
different fields, including the theory of student-centered learning from sociology and the Kubler-Ross grief model from psychiatry. A discourse analysis will critically analyze existing scholarly articles, policy documents, opinion pieces, and any other literature related to the IEP process. A discourse analysis will also allow for in depth discussion and recommendations on how challenges of the IEP process can be overcome.

**Background Information**

**What is an IEP?**

At the request of the parent/guardian or school, the Identification, Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) must first identify a student as an individual who should receive special education programming. An Individual Education Plan is a legal document that identifies a student’s learning expectations and outlines how the school will address these expectations through appropriate *accommodations*, program *modifications* and/or alternative programs as well as specific instructional and assessment strategies. An *accommodation* is defined as special teaching and assessment strategies, human supports, and/or technological equipment that enable a student to learn and demonstrate learning, such as laptop equipment, additional time for assessments, and priority seating in the classroom. A *modification* is defined as changes that are made to the grade-level expectation in order to meet a student’s learning needs, such as decreasing the number/complexity of grade-level expectations or reverting to a previous grade-level expectation.

**Overview of the Process**

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
The IEP is geared towards each student’s strengths and needs and must be continually updated to include new assessment data to ensure the goals of the document are being met. As outlined in the Ministry of Education document “The Individual Education Plan: A Resource Guide,” there are five main phases in the IEP process: gathering information, setting the direction, developing the IEP, implementing the IEP, and reviewing/updating the IEP. First, there must be a consultation between the parents, student, classroom teacher, principal, and SERT (hereby known as the IEP team) in order to gather pertinent information. This includes reviewing the student’s records, gathering information through observation of the student, and conducting further assessments if necessary. In the second phase, the IEP team begins establishing roles and responsibilities as well as identifying the student’s strengths and needs. In the third phase, the IEP is developed in which appropriate accommodations and/or modifications are outlined. In the fourth phase, the IEP is presented to the IEP team and put into practice. The fifth and final phase is of great importance, as the IEP must be regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the student’s current abilities.

**Literature Review**

**Parental Involvement**

Parental involvement in the IEP process is a recurring theme in literature. Professionals are more likely than they once were to involve parents of children with learning disabilities, advocating for a family-centered model. This type of model believes that families should be in control of the decision-making for their child,

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5 Ibid., 10.
including program practices and intervention options. However, while numerous studies suggest that our current education system is increasingly recognizing the importance of parental involvement in children with learning disabilities, parents are finding it difficult in becoming equal and meaningful members of their child’s support team.

**Grieving Period**

In order to understand how to overcome the challenge of lack of parental involvement in the IEP process, educators must first understand parents’ intimidation in the first place. Educators must take into consideration the emotions that parents experience when their child is diagnosed with a learning disability/exceptionality. The Kubler-Ross grief model can be used to show the emotional reactions that parents experience when they are informed of a learning disability. Although the model is not representative of every parent’s experience, it is helpful for educators to know that some parents will need time to process their child’s diagnosis. In essence, there are five different stages that a parent will experience: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In the first stage of denial, the parent refuses to see the problem at hand, such as inattentiveness, immaturity, rambunctiousness, and even spoiling. The parent is content with the “wait and see” approach, especially since boys mature slower than girls. Denying that a child has a learning problem may last for a few weeks to a few months, until the second stage occurs: anger. Now that the “problem” is not disappearing, the parents begin to look for someone to blame. Usually the first person to take the brunt of the anger is the teacher. For example, perhaps the child is just not responding to the

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7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 120.
teaching technique. Or perhaps the teacher is not doing enough to help the student. The blame can then extend to the curriculum and education system. Once the anger has subsided, the next stage is bargaining. Surely the child’s learning problem can be “fixed,” therefore the parents will employ a family doctor, medical specialist, or even a wide variety of ideas that the teacher can incorporate into his/her programs.\textsuperscript{11} Although there are times when medical professionals can be of assistance, behavioral patterns cannot be cured. The realization that the “problem” cannot be cured leads to the fourth stage: depression. After exhausting numerous options, the parents are upset that they have not been able to help their child and worry about what kind of future he/she will have. They are disappointed their efforts and patience did not equate to positive results, and eventually hopelessness sets in. Eventually, “out of the despair, sense of hopelessness, and self-doubt come the final stage: acceptance.”\textsuperscript{12} The parents of the learning disabled child now have an emotion understanding of how their child learns, and even though acceptance does not mean the problem will go away, the parents understand that their child has strengths and weaknesses.\textsuperscript{13}

**Feeling Vulnerable**

The British Columbia Ministry of Education issued a Special Education document in 2009 that directly acknowledged parents “play a vital role in the education of their children with special needs by working in partnership with educators and other service personnel.”\textsuperscript{14} The document goes on to outline how school personnel must make the effort to include parents in the IEP process, stating that parents are “important partners in

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 123.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
the development of the Individual Education Plan.”\textsuperscript{15} Lai and Vadeboncoeur’s study analyzed ten sets of parents who had children with learning disabilities. The findings concluded that there was a definite “imbalance” in the partnership, in which none of the participants were aware of a defined “partnering” role.\textsuperscript{16} Six of the participants viewed their roles as “seeing and listening, essentially receiving information, a relationship that was decided unidirectional.”\textsuperscript{17} One participant described her experience as feeling like she and her husband were “on trial,” being questioned on various topics for one hour by nine school professionals.\textsuperscript{18}

In an additional study by Zeitlin and Curcic, several parents shared feelings of “invisibility” in stating, “The school did not recognize me at all and I was seen as more of an obstacle in the process.”\textsuperscript{19} Another parent stated, “I was really disappointed at the last meeting I attended. I felt talked over and not talked to. I was not included in on any of the assessment decisions.”\textsuperscript{20} In essence, professionals need to realize that parents already feel vulnerable in meetings, and therefore need to feel welcomed so that they may offer ideas and insight into their child.

Furthermore, in a study conducted on school practices and parent advocacy in special education, the investigation showed that schools undertake a number of practices that undermine the equity of participation between parents and professionals.\textsuperscript{21} For

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 876.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 877.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
example, the professionalization of language is considered a barrier between students and professionals. Parents often cited “confusing language” and “complicated legal terms” as why they feel uncomfortable and have unequal footings in meetings. In a specific example with a child who has met with a speech pathologist, the parent found complex tests and formulas too confusing and complicated. Subsequently, the parents’ inability to understand the test results gave the school full control over the decision-making process with regards to the child.

**Overcoming the Challenge**

In order to form a true partnership, certain studies have been dedicated to offering advice to both parents and professionals on how to improve their relationship. In a study conducted by Diliberto and Brewer, the key to successful IEP development was found to be open communication. Their study was founded on a scenario in which a kindergarten boy, Ben, was having behavior problems and his teacher requested an IEP meeting. During the meeting, Ben’s parents were shocked to learn that the classroom teacher was the only team member who knew Sam had an IEP. The researchers offered tips on how to always maintain open communication so that this situation should never happen again. For example, include parents from the very beginning and communicate with them in a manner “that respects the knowledge they bring to the table while also demonstrating that educators care about students’ well-being.” As previously mentioned, parents can feel overwhelmed that their child has a learning disability, and also feel intimidated by the “professional” knowledge of the school personnel. Parents, however, bring invaluable

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22 Ibid., 690.
24 Ibid., 32.
insight to the IEP team, such as behaviors and routines observed at home. Furthermore, the researchers suggest that an “open door” policy be encouraged in which the parents can visit the classroom and participate in classroom activities, lunchtime routines, and even field trips. This will not only allow the parents to be involved in the “policy” side of things by developing the IEP, but it will also allow them to observe their child as the IEP is being implemented. This way, if there is something they see that is working/not working for their child, it can be discussed at future meetings.

A more recent initiative to improve parent-professional relationships is the introduction of parent education and parent training programs for children with learning disabilities. Reio and Fornes recognize that after the diagnosis of a child’s disability, not only does the classroom teacher need to adapt his/her strategies, but the parents must also learn how to best optimize the child’s learning and development. Therefore, participation in parent education programs can be an integral part of parenting a child with special needs because it can provide parents with information and training needed to moderate stress and frustration. Parent education programs are not meant to tell parents how to raise their child, rather they are meant to assist parents in coping with the stress of having a child with a learning disability and help them maintain the consistency of the IEP in a home setting. This certainly makes sense, as an IEP regulates a child’s behavior and academics from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., however outside of these hours the child still needs to maintain the same stability at home. Parent education provides the parents with specific knowledge and systematic activities with the goal of promoting the development

25 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 54.
and competence of their child.\textsuperscript{28} Parents can still feel confident in working with their child at home, such as on homework or afterschool clubs and activities. Parents will ultimately feel a sense of empowerment, which will help to build a collaborative and meaningful relationship between parent and professional.\textsuperscript{29} No longer will parents sit in on meetings and feel as though they can only “listen,” rather they can take an active role and provide information on how interventions are working into family routines.

**Student Involvement**

Not only are parents an important member of the IEP team, but also students are an integral part of the IEP process. Student involvement in education has become an important part of the \textsuperscript{21st} century learning. Classrooms look very different today than they did twenty to thirty years ago. Teachers are no longer standing at the front of the room in a lecture-style format; rather teachers are now seen as the facilitator of learning. This is supported by the student-centered learning approach, which is defined as:

An approach to learning in which learners choose not only what to study but also how and why that topic might be of interest. In other words, the learning environment has learner responsibility and activity at its heart, in contrast to the emphasis on instructor control and the coverage of academic content found in much conventional, didactic teaching.\textsuperscript{30}

Student-centered learning is especially important for students receiving special education programming, as it requires instructors to see each learner as unique and distinct. In other words, “recognizing that learners in any classroom learn at different rates with

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 57.
different styles, they have different abilities and talents, their feelings of efficacy may vary, and they may be in different stages of development.”31 Student-centered learning has numerous benefits including learner motivation increases when learners have a stake in their own learning and are treated as co-creators in the learning process, and learners assume new responsibilities and gain self-confidence.32

**Leaving Students Out**

Although the focus of education and special education programming should always be on the student, literature suggests this is not always the case. According to a study conducted by Pawley and Tennant in Great Britain, very few Year 8 students (aged 12-13) were able to communicate a clear understanding of IEPs and very few students could communicate stated targets from their IEP.33 The study focuses on the “student participation” section of the 2001 Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs, which states:

> Children and young people with special educational needs have a unique knowledge of their own needs and circumstances and their own views about what sort of help they would like to help them make the most of their education. They should, where possible, participate in all the decision-making processes that occur in education including the setting of learning targets and contributing to IEPs, discussions about choice of schools, contributing to the assessment of their needs and to the annual review and transition processes.34

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 24.
34 Ibid.
The results of the Pawley and Tennant study that interviewed eighteen students with IEPs were alarming:

From a total of 18 students who were asked if they had heard of an IEP, two students were able to communicate an understanding of an IEP and their IEP targets, and recalled discussions with teachers in which they were involved in target setting and review of the targets. Three further students indicated that they had only heard of an IEP: two of these gave no indication of any concept, with the third asking, ‘is it a person who comes?’ The remaining 13 students showed no recollection of the term.\textsuperscript{35}

An additional study on student involvement in the IEP process likens the exclusion of the student to planning a birthday party:

Imagine being a small child and hearing your parents talk about your birthday party. You hear the excitement in their voices as they talk and plan, starting with a theme for the party, deciding whom they will invite, and then figuring out who will do each job. As the time draws closer, you hear more and more conversations about your birthday party, and so you know it is coming soon. And then your birthday comes and goes, but no one ever invites you to your party. Maybe they just forgot to invite me, you think.\textsuperscript{36}

As the child gets older and becomes a teenager, he/she is now old enough to help plan the “birthday party.” However, the teenage responds, “Why would I want to become involved now? If these birthday parties were supposed to be my birthday parties, why wasn’t I invited all along? Why didn’t I have the chance to select themes that interest

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 184.
\item Jamie Van Dycke, James Martin & David Lovett, “Why Is This Cake on Fire?”  \textit{Teaching Exceptional Children} 38 (2006): 42.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Challenges of the IEP Process

Overcoming the Challenge

Applying a student-centered learning approach to the IEP process would allow students to be active participants in their own learning, make decisions about how and what they will learn, understand learning goals and expectations, and monitor their own learning to develop strategies for learning. In other words, students should be invited to their own “birthday party.” Students should not only be part of IEP meetings, but should also be part of the IEP process “so they can learn about and communicate their needs, preferences, and interests.” When including students in IEP meetings, it is important to ask, “Are we inviting students to speak or to just attend?” In a study conducted by Martin et. al., researchers observed 109 middle and high school IEP meetings to determine who talked in IEP meetings. In those meetings, special educators spoke 51% of the time; family members spoke 15% of the time; general educators and administration each spoke 9%; support personnel spoke 6%; and multiple conversations occurred during 5% of the meeting. Students, of which the meeting is centered on, only talked during 3% of the meeting time.

Van Dyke, Martin, and Lovett identify a number of ways students should be involved in the IEP planning process: Have an informative role in developing and writing their educational performance description; Aid in developing measurable postsecondary goals in their IEPs; Help identify the accommodations, modifications, and

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37 Ibid., 43.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
supports that they need; Be responsible in the achievement of coordinated transition activities, post-school linkages, and postsecondary goals.\textsuperscript{43}

**Quality Goals and Targets**

The third and final challenge of the IEP process that was revealed through literature review is the lack of quality goals and targets in IEPs. One of the most important components of the IEP are the “annual program goals and learning expectations for each reporting period in each subject or course in which modified expectations are required and/or in each alternative program area.”\textsuperscript{44} These goals should answer the questions “where are we going” in terms of what should the student be able to achieve, and “how will we know when we get there” in terms of what assessment/evaluations will be used to measure when the goal has been met. For example, instead of saying “Jack will improve his reading this term,” a measurable goal could read, “Jack will improve his reading by achieving 15/20 on a sight word recognition assessment in 3 out of 5 given opportunities.”

**A Bureaucratic Process**

A study that analyzed over 2497 IEP goals of 135 Portuguese students used four dimensions of analysis in defining a quality goal: Measurability (the target has a beginning and an end); Functionality (the child needs the target to participate in all/most daily activities); Generality (the skill represents a general concept or class of responses); and Instructional Context (the skill can be taught across daily activities).\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore,

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
the study emphasizes the importance of IEP goals in that they “represent the personal destination translated into desirable behaviours and skills that will enable students with additional support to meet their educational and functional needs.”\footnote{Ibid., 508.} The study found that “goals are generally poorly written, particularly in terms of their measurability and that their quality decreases as students’ progress in education.”\footnote{Ibid., 507.} Furthermore, the study noted, “Many professionals have long regarded the IEP as a bureaucratic procedure with little impact and utility.”\footnote{Ibid., 508.} In other words, because the IEP is a required document for students with exceptionalities, some educators are simply going through the motions of creating the document with little regard for the student’s areas of need.

An additional study conducted in the United States by Pretti-Frontczak and Bricker found that there was a gap between recommended and actual practice in writing IEP goals and objectives. Findings from two decades of research indicated that IEPs often (a) contain missing mandated components; (b) target non-functional skills, such as stacking blocks; (c) contain little information regarding how goals will be generalized or what performance criteria will be used; (d) emphasize pre-academic skills versus real-life skills; and (e) include goals and objectives that do not address a child’s area of identified need.\footnote{Kristie Pretti-Frontczak & Diane Bricker, “Enhancing the Quality of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Goals and Objectives,” \textit{Journal of Early Intervention} 23 (2000): 93.}

**Overcoming the Challenge**

In order to address the lack of measurable and quality goals, many education departments have been providing training to educators. In one particular instance, eighty-six participants from across the United States were asked to participate in a training
session that taught educators how to write IEP goals based on functionality, generality, instructional context, and measurability.\(^{50}\) Participants completed a two-day training session in which they were shown the difference between low quality goals (the child will improve gross motor skills to a four-year old level by the end of the year) versus high quality goals (the child will independently walk for up to 15 feet holding onto parent’s or teacher’s hands at east once a week for 2 weeks).\(^{51}\) Researchers noted a major improvement in the quality of IEP goals by educators after the training session in terms of goals/objectives that are functional, generative, understandable, and measurable.\(^{52}\)

An in-service training program provided to eighteen teachers in Portugal aimed to improve the quality of the goals/objectives on IEPs, including reducing the number on the plans.\(^{53}\) Quality goals were defined as being specific and measurable, with meaningful criteria for generalization and timeliness.\(^{54}\) As a result of the training, participants developed an average of 9.28 goals per IEP as opposed to an average of 38.33 goals prior to training.\(^{55}\) In addition, the goals and objectives written after training were more functional, with an average functionality score of 14.08 compared to 7.79 prior to training.\(^{56}\) Thus, training programs for educators targeting measurable and functional goals seems to be the best way to address the lack of quality IEP goals.

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 98.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 99.
\(^{52}\) Ibid., 100.
\(^{53}\) Tania Boavida et al., “A Training Program to Improve Goals and Objectives Through the Routines-Based Interview,” *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education* 33 (2013): 201.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 202.
\(^{56}\) Ibid.
Conclusion

Overall, educators can employ a variety of strategies including open communication, parent education, involving students from the beginning of the process, and educator training programs, in order to overcome the three major challenges of the IEP process: parental involvement, student involvement, and quality goals/targets. Think back to the example of Jack in the introduction. Jack had just been diagnosed with a learning disability and his parents will need time to work through potential issues (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) like those presented in the Kubler-Ross grief model. By understanding the different grieving stages, educators can maintain open communication with Jack’s parents and introduce them to the IEP team when they feel ready. Jack’s parents will inevitably feel intimidated at first, therefore educators should ensure a welcoming environment by avoiding complicated legal/policy terms and encouraging an “open door” policy in which Jack’s parents are allowed to stop by the classroom anytime. Jack will also feel intimidated and confused at first, therefore educators should ensure he is invited to share his feelings and opinions at all IEP meetings. In other words, it’s his birthday party and he should plan according to his wants and needs. Finally, educators should ensure that Jack’s IEP contains quality goals and targets that are measurable and reflect his particular needs. Jack’s teacher could consider taking a training session, if available, or ask the SERT if the goals are measurable, functional, and understandable. Jack and his parents may feel that his education has become further complicated by his learning disability diagnosis, but with careful consideration and planning by his educators, his future will inevitably be bright.
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Bibliography


