

Improving Individualized Education Programs for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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### Abstract

Special education in the United States began with Public Law 94-142, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). This law created the Individualized Education Program (IEP), a document that must contain the personal education plan of each student in special education. There have been many parent complaints and lawsuits on the inadequacy of IEPs, specifically for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a highly prevalent neuro-developmental disability. Several investigations were done on IEP quality which resulted in poor outcomes, especially in areas of individualization for students with ASD, parental involvement, data collection, the present level statement, goals and objectives, and progress monitoring. The viewpoint of educators was lacking in the literature. This research examined the problems with IEPs for students with ASD, from the perspective of special education teachers. The goal was to uncover reasons for IEP problems and begin to develop solutions. 45 teachers from various districts in a rural and an urban county responded to a survey on IEPs. It was found that the IEP system is lacking sufficient teacher training, a rationalized universal form and process, and enough time and support for teachers to manage all responsibilities. The results were analyzed and ideas for improvement, as well as suggestions from experienced teachers, are included.

## Improving Individualized Education Programs for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

### **Introduction**

#### **History**

There has not always been equal educational opportunity for children in the United States. According to E. Martin, R. Martin, and Terman (1996), the legal requirement for public schools in the U.S. to adequately serve all children of varying abilities is quite recent. Prior to the 1970s, the services given to children with disabilities in American public schools were decided by the local school districts themselves and were quite minimal (Martin et al., 1996). In fact, “until the mid-1970s, laws in most states allowed school districts to refuse to enroll any student they considered ‘uneducable,’” (Martin et al., 1996, p. 26). For the vast majority of American history, children with disabilities were not given the educational support they required in public schools, if they were accepted in at all.

Largely because of the Civil Rights Movement, advocates for educational rights began to speak out and advance their cause. States started initiatives aimed towards achieving educational equality for everyone in the U.S., and federal court cases began going in this direction as well (Martin et al., 1996). Public Law 94-142, originally called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was proposed in 1971, in attempt to correct the huge national problem of inequality in education. The law was passed in 1975, starting the implementation process of what is known today as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In the 1984 Case *Smith v. Robinson*, the Supreme court articulated that IDEA is “a comprehensive Scheme set up by congress to aid the states in complying with their Constitutional obligations to provide public education for children with disabilities” (as cited in Martin et al., 1996, p. 30). IDEA was meant to be an assistance to public schools in addressing the educational rights issue. Obligations

are laid out in the IDEA for all fund receiving public educational institutions. These mandates include locating students with disabilities in need of services, performing appropriate evaluations on these students, and creating and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) (Martin et al., 1996).

Public educational systems immediately had to take on new, difficult responsibilities to satisfy the mandates of IDEA. In *Board of Education v. Rowley*, the Court stated that IDEA “leaves to the states the responsibility for developing and executing educational programs for handicapped children” within broad requirements (as cited in Martin et al., 1996, p. 34). Schools were suddenly given the duty of designing individualized educations for each of their students with a disability. This task is arduous because each student is different in terms of level and type of impairment. Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) introduce the IEP document as “the primary tool for enabling schools to provide this required level of support” (p.1). This document was created to keep track of all special education students and create a specialized education plan for each of them. The Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education (2012) defines the IEP as follows:

The individualized education program (IEP) is a document required by federal law for every student who has been found to be eligible to receive special education services.

The IEP is a summary of the assessment data collected on the student that supports a team decision to provide special education services. The IEP is intended to guide what the student will learn during the school year (Banks, 2012, p. 1184).

This document is extremely important to the special education system for following the mandates of IDEA, but also has been seen to be an unsatisfactory system.

## Literature Review

Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) provide a literature review on the past two decades of IEP development. In the beginning of IDEA, meeting its requirements through the IEP seemed to be very challenging for school districts. “For the first two decades of the IEP requirement (1975-1995), educators struggled to meet paperwork requirements, convene effective IEP meetings, develop compliant and meaningful IEPs, and to coordinate services between general educators and special educators” (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014, p. 1). Subsequently, revisions were made to the federal policy in 1997. The new requirements “provided more explicit language regarding the scope of the content of the IEP, the membership of the IEP team, and the process for development” (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014, p.1). This update was intended to improve the IEP system and ensure that the mandates of IDEA were being followed.

Although revisions were made to IDEA, Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) found that schools still struggled to meet the requirements of IEPs. According to Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, and Jung (2010) the updated IDEA legally required elements of IEPs included: (a) the student’s present level of functional and academic performance, (b) annual measurable intervention-based goals, (c) a progress monitoring plan, (d) a list of services and supports delivered to the child, (e) modifications provided to the child, (f) a depiction of the student’s participation in general education, and (g) accommodations that will be provided to the child. This document is also required to be revised annually by a team of parents, administrators, teachers, and psychologists (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) reviewed three studies that all showed school districts failing to meet these requirements. The results of these studies provide concerning evidence that the IEP system was still very flawed

after the 1997 revision. The IDEA was updated again in 2004, but there were no significant changes to the IEP.

The results of Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) were narrowed down to a few important problems in the IEP creation and implementation system. The first main problem was ineffective assessment. It is important and obligatory that a child's present level of performance is assessed and included in the IEP, as well as concentrated on when creating goals and objectives. Unfortunately, Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) found that "teachers were less likely to engage in effective assessment practices" (p. 8) and expressed "concerns about the extent to which assessment practices inform curriculum and program development within the context of the IEP" (p.10). Failing to perform informative assessments would have significant negative effects on the quality of IEPs, which is another problem that Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) uncovered. IEPs have generally been found to be inadequate in accordance with the law. Districts were found to have difficulty creating functional present level statements, goals and objectives, and support plans. They reported that most IEPs were non-compliant with the requirements of the IDEA. The quality of content in IEPs was also examined and found to be low (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). A few studies examined by Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) emphasized the correlation between professional development and IEP quality. The studies were aimed towards comparing training methods, but concluded that all professional training models "were found to have positive effects on IEP development" (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014, p.10). Professional training appears to be extremely important to developing quality IEPs, suggesting that members of IEP teams may require more guidance to create satisfactory IEPs.

## **Parent Complaints**

The dynamics of IEP meetings were also examined by Blackwell and Rossetti (2014). Two studies revealed that family members do not always participate and express their opinions in IEP meetings; suggesting that there is limited family contribution to the IEP development. Several studies specified that the opportunity to significantly participate was not given to families, leaving them unable to supply the content they believe is important. 51 parents were surveyed about their satisfaction with their child's IEP, and over half answered that they would like to have more influence (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Families unsatisfied with their child's IEP is not an uncommon phenomenon. When the IDEA was updated in 1990, parental input options were increased, giving parents the ability to file complaints with the state Department of Education when they are unhappy with their child's special education services (White, 2014). White (2014) investigated these complaints and found "the most commonly cited complaint issue pertained to students' IEPs" (P.82). Parents seem to be very upset with the lack of input they have in their child's IEP and other facets of the special education process (White, 2014).

In addition to being unhappy with their child's IEP, many parents are simply very confused. The Michigan Alliance for Families (MAF) is a resource in the state of Michigan for families of children with disabilities. These parent training and education centers are required by IDEA. Their goal is to help improve each child's education and their mission statement asserts to parents that they "assist you in knowing your rights, effectively communicating your child's needs, and advising how to help them develop and learn" (Michigan Alliance for Families, 2017). The MAF has a section on their website specifically for IEP information and also offers regular workshops titled "Understanding Individualized Education Programs (IEP)". This workshop serves many of the confused and troubled parents of children with disabilities who are

trying to comprehend their child's IEP. The program tells parents "when you better understand the IEP process, and how to participate, you will have a better chance of your child getting the services they need to be successful in school" (Michigan Alliance for Families, 2017). Parents seem to attend the workshop for just that reason, they have struggled to get their child required special education services through their IEP, and do not know where else to go for help. Sandee Koski, Training Presenter for MAF, announced in the IEP workshop that parents often feel like they are fighting with the school to get their child the education he or she deserves. The fact that parents are struggling this much with the special education system is very concerning, and provides additional evidence that the IEP system under IDEA is flawed.

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder**

A growing concern for the special education system in the U.S. is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Autism Spectrum Disorder is a highly prevalent neuro-developmental disability. The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (2013) lays out diagnostic criteria for this disorder. Criterion A is "Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 50). This includes deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communication, and understanding relationships. Criterion B is "Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities" including movements, routines, interests, and sensory input seeking actions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 50). Criteria also includes: C. symptoms are present in early stages of life, D. symptoms cause significant impairment, and E. behavior cannot better be explained by another diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD can be accompanied by intellectual impairment, language impairment, another medical, genetic, neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioral condition, or



catatonia (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2016), this disorder is equal amongst racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, but is about 4.5 times more common in boys than girls. 1 in 68 of children were found to have ASD in 2012 (CDC, 2016). This number has been growing through the years, as it was only 1 in 150 in 2000 (CDC, 2016). The increase in children with autism has begun to put a strain on IDEA and the special education system.

“According to 2008-2009 data, students with ASD comprised 0.7% of the total student population” (White, 2014, p. 80). Many of these students require special education services due to the nature of their disability and the academic, behavioral, and social challenges it causes (White, 2014). This creates a large financial burden for the educational system (White, 2014). The CDC states that between 11.5 and 60.9 billion dollars are spent on children with ASD every year in the US (CDC, 2016). Much of this cost is outside of the education system, but school districts were estimated to spend more than \$11,000 per student with autism in the 1999-2000 school year (White, 2014). Students with ASD have become a huge part of the population that IDEA serves, and even with all the effort and spending, “a large percentage of parents do not feel that school-based services are sufficient to meet their child’s needs” (White, 2014, p. 80). Serving the ASD population in public schools can be difficult for a number of reasons. The DSM V states that “in young children with autism spectrum disorder, lack of social and communication abilities may hamper learning, especially learning through social interaction or in settings with peers” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, P.57). This is inherently problematic for public school systems that are based on students learning both in parallel and collaboratively with peers. Communicating wants and needs can also be difficult for students with ASD, leading to behavioral problems in school. Difficulties also arise out of some students’

inability to tolerate change, fixation on certain areas, intellectual impairment, and other common comorbid disorders. Regardless of the complications, schools are required to create and carry out an appropriate and beneficial individualized education plan for each student with ASD.

The challenges in educating students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, were found to lead to IEPs of lower quality. Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) found that the IEPs of students with behavioral disabilities “were more likely to be non-compliant with the procedural and substantive requirements” of the IDEA (p. 9). ASD falls under this behavioral umbrella, potentially leading to difficulty creating adequate IEPs for students with it. Examinations of IEPs for children with ASD have supported this assertion. Ruble et al. (2010) looked at 35 IEPs for students with ASD and found that they were far below the standards in several areas. As discussed earlier, there are many problems and parent complaints with IEPs in general, but it seems to be even more prevalent for children with ASD. “Parents of children with ASD endorsed higher levels of dissatisfaction with community and school-based services than parents of children with other health care needs” (White, 2014, p. 81). The specific parental complaints about IEPs are discussed in White (2014). Complaints claim that IEPs for children with ASD are often missing vital sections, such as measurable goals and objectives or other services provided. If these components are present on the IEP they are often vaguely described, making them difficult to follow. There are also complaints of IEPs not being properly followed and implemented. Children are not always receiving the supports, services, accommodations, and modifications specified in their IEP (White, 2014).

The parent complaints have risen to a very serious level. Ruble et al. (2010) states that IEPs for children with ASD have become a large legal issue, resulting in many lawsuits. In fact, the disputes regarding IEPs for children with ASD have become “the fastest growing and most

expensive area of educational litigation” (Ruble et al., 2010, p. 1460). Etscheidt (2003) reviewed 78 cases addressing IEPs for students with ASD between 1997 and 2002 alone. These cases took place at administrative due-process hearings, district courts, and circuit courts in 28 states. The students involved ranged from preschool to high school age and all cases were aimed at deciding “whether the IEPs for students with autism were reasonably calculated to provide educational benefit” (Etscheidt, 2003, p.53). Although parents won only 43% of the cases, it was found that IEPs were not always appropriate, specifically in the areas of goals and methodology (Etscheidt, 2003).

In face of the lawsuits, Ruble et al. (2010) conducted a full examination of the quality of IEPs for children with ASD. They created their own assessment tool called the “Measure of IEP Quality for Students with Autism” based on the IDEA requirements for IEPs previously discussed. The assessment tool also utilized the National Research Council’s (NRC) recommendations for educating children with ASD. The 9 NRC quality indicators advocated for IEPs to contain:

- (a) parental concerns, (b) social skills to improve involvement in daily activities, (c) expressive, receptive and non-verbal communication skills, (d) a symbolic functional communication system, (e) engagement in tasks or play that are developmentally appropriate, including an appropriate motivational system, (f) fine and gross motor skills for engaging in age appropriate activities, (g) basic cognitive and academic thinking skills, (h) replacement of problem behaviors with appropriate behaviors, (i) organizational skills and other behaviors needed for success in a general education classroom, and (j) full year programming (Ruble et al., 2010, p. 1462).

The created measuring tool was found reliable, and was used to evaluate 35 IEPs of students with ASD. These students varied in level of impairment, gender, race, urban-rural classification, and socio-economic status. IEP quality was not found to depend on individual school, teacher, or child factors. The results rather sarcastically announced “the ‘good’ news is that, although IEP quality was poor, it was equally poor across all assessed school and child characteristics” (Ruble et al., 2010, p.1465). The IEPs examined were not found to meet the requirements of IDEA or the recommendations of NRC. Two of the largest areas of weakness in the IEPs were measurability of objectives, and mention of parental concerns (Ruble et al., 2010).

Families of children with ASD have revealed their position on the current IEP system through their complaints, lawsuits, and requests for help. There clearly seem to be important problems in the development and implementation of IEPs, especially in regards to meeting legal standards and specific needs of children with ASD. Complaints, lawsuits, and actual IEPs have been examined. From these investigations, the major problems with IEPs appear to be in creation, assessment and measurement, and parental contribution. Evidence has been provided that IEPs are truly lacking in these areas. However, one major gap in the literature is the perspective from within the schools. With accusations being raised against schools and teachers for creating and implementing inadequate IEPs, it is necessary to explore why these problems exist, and how the teachers view them. In addition to further investigation from a different perspective, involving teachers in this discussion is important in order to reach solutions. Gathering input and suggestions from the people who are creating and using IEPs every day is essential in discovering how to improve them. Questioning teachers about their training, experience, difficulties, and suggestions on IEPs for children with ASD may potentially uncover solutions

for this important special education issue. The goal of this research was uncovering problems in the IEP system and explanations for why they may exist.

### **Methodology**

In order to gain the true perspective of special education teachers, a survey was created and administered. Directors and administrative secretaries of special education departments in over 30 school districts were contacted. These districts were in both a rural and an urban county in a Midwestern State. An email was sent to these employees, explaining the goal of the research and requesting them to pass the information and survey along to the special education teachers in their department. There were 45 responses to the survey, although not every respondent answered every question.

The survey consisted of 5 sections. The first section focused on IDEA legally required components of the IEP. Participants were asked to rate the components in three categories: how important the components were for providing service to the child with ASD, how often the components were presented in actual IEPs, and how usefully described the components are in the IEPs. The next section was the set up the same, but asked respondents to rate ASD IEP recommendations from the National Research Council. Following that was a section questioning the participants' knowledge of and training on IEPs. The next section focused on participants' view of parental involvement in IEPs. Finally, there were a few miscellaneous questions and a free response section where participants were instructed to discuss problems they have had with the IEP process and suggestions for improvement.

The survey was meant to investigate teachers' opinions on the IEP system. They were asked about their own work as well as observations on the work of others. Questions were especially aimed at areas that were known to be problematic. The free response section was

intended to allow teachers to comment and share any frustrations or hardships they face, as well as any useful suggestions they may have for colleagues. These responses were then analyzed and compared to insights gained from previous IEP investigation. The ultimate hope was to discover issues and possible solutions to improve the education system for children with ASD

## Results

### Teacher Experience and Training

There were 45 responses to the survey sent out to over 30 school districts. Participants were first asked how many years of experience they had working with children with ASD (See Fig. 1). At least one year of experience was required for participation.

MIN	MAX	MEAN	ST DEV
1 year	40 years	11.55 years	8.67 years

Figure 1

All but one respondent said that they were either “somewhat confident” (35.29%) or “extremely confident” (61.76%) in their ability to create a good IEP. In addition to being confident in their abilities, special education teachers responded that they were comfortable filling out an IEP form. All respondents claimed to be either “somewhat comfortable” (41.18%) or “extremely comfortable” (58.82%).

61.76% of teachers said that their school district’s IEP form was similar to the model they were trained with. 41.18% said that they were “extremely comfortable” with their district’s IEP form, and 55.88% said that they were “somewhat comfortable”. Although all respondents seemed comfortable with the IEP form they use, when asked if there should be a universal form, 84.85% responded yes.

Teachers were also asked what kinds of IEP training they received. Specifically, training for creating IEPs. Percentages of teachers that received specific types of training are shown in Figure 2.

TYPE OF TRAINING FOR IEP CREATION	PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS
Formal training in undergraduate education courses	38.24%
Formal training in graduate education courses	61.76%
Formal training in professional development	67.65%
Informal training on the job	88.24%
Informal training through observing others	73.53%
No training at all	0.00%
Other	2.94%

Figure 2

81.82% of respondents said they believe they could benefit from more training on IEP development and use. The IEP process was broken down into significant parts, and teachers were asked to rank the parts in order of what they would most like more training in to what they feel they least need more training in. The percentages of how often each part was ranked in the top 3 are shown in Figure 3.

PARTS OF IEP PROCESS	HOW OFTEN RANKED IN TOP 3 FOR MORE DESIRED TRAINING
Collecting baseline data for IEP planning and creating	62.96%
IEP formation meeting	32.00%
IEP implementation follow-through	38.46%
Present Level Statement section	55.55%
Goals and Objectives section	57.69%
Accommodations and Modifications section	33.34%
Special Education Services and Programs section	37.04%

Figure 3

The three sections that teachers appeared to most want more training in are; 1) collecting baseline data for IEP planning and creating, 2) the Present Level Statement section, and 3) the Goals and Objectives section. Participants were also asked to rank the parts based on their level of comfort, and rankings were evenly distributed among all parts.

### IDEA Legally Required Components

Teachers were asked to rate each of the IDEA legally required components of the IEP in three different categories. First, they were requested to rate the importance of each component per their experience. This reveals their level of agreement with the legal standards for the IEP. They were then asked how often real IEPs contain each component, showing the extent to which legal standards are being followed. Finally, they were asked how usefully described the components usually are. This information gives an idea of how detailed the components are in IEPs and how useful the information is to the people using it. All ratings were on a scale of 1-5.

The mean and standard deviation is shown below for each rating of each component (See Fig. 4).

IDEA LEGALLY REQUIRED COMPONENTS OF IEP	HOW IMPORTANT		HOW OFTEN PRESENT		HOW USEFULLY DESCRIBED	
	MEAN	ST DEV	MEAN	ST DEV	MEAN	ST DEV
The child's Present Level Statement	4.81	.46	4.78	.53	4.08	.68
Measurable Annual Goals	4.78	.58	4.64	.63	4.08	.68
How the child's progress toward meeting annual goals will be measured, and when periodic reports will be provided	4.47	.64	4.42	.76	4.11	.77
The special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child	4.89	.31	4.69	.52	4.31	.78
Program modifications or supports for school personal that will be provided for the child	4.78	.48	4.31	.74	4.00	.78
The extent to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular classroom	4.08	.98	4.14	.92	3.83	.90
Individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on state and district wide assessments	4.51	.81	4.20	.89	3.94	.92

All components are rated highly in all categories. The lowest ratings are in the category of practicality, but are still relatively high.

When asked if they believed there were any other components of the IEP that should be legally required, most teachers did not respond or said no. However, there were a few suggestions made. It was recommended by two teachers that the extent to which children with ASD can function independently be added to the requirements of the IEP. Another suggestion



was to include outside agencies and services involved in the child's life. An interesting response stated "IEP's would be more helpful (and better understood by most families), if less was legally required. They have become massive 15-20 page documents in legal language with perhaps 2-3 pages of any use to students, teachers and families".

### National Research Council Recommendations

The recommendations for IEPs of children with ASD from the National Research Council were also a part of the survey. Teachers were asked to rate them in the same way as they did the IDEA requirements. These recommendations were ranked lower than the IDEA requirements, but were still high (See Fig. 5).

NRC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IEPs FOR CHILDREN WITH ASD	HOW IMPORTANT		HOW OFTEN PRESENT		HOW USEFULLY DESCRIBED	
	MEAN	ST DEV	MEAN	ST DEV	MEAN	ST DEV
Parental concerns are described on IEP	4.64	.54	4.47	.76	3.94	.88
Goals that reflect organizational skills and other behaviors that underlie success in general education program	4.41	.69	3.62	.97	3.53	1.04
Goals that reflect expressive, receptive, and non-verbal communication skills (as appropriate)	4.74	.50	4.24	.69	4.09	.74
Goals that reflect social skills to improve involvement in school and family activities	4.71	.62	4.00	.84	3.71	.92
Goals that reflect symbolic functional communication system	4.29	.79	3.53	.98	3.56	.88
Goals that reflect basic cognitive and academic thinking skills	4.41	.69	4.00	.94	3.79	.91
Goals that reflect fine and gross motor skills to be utilized when in engaging in age appropriate activities	3.88	.80	3.44	.95	3.55	.78
Goals that reflect replacement of problem behaviors with appropriate behaviors	4.44	.91	3.47	1.14	3.53	1.17
Goals that reflect engagement in tasks or play which are developmentally appropriate including an appropriate motivational system (1=not at all, 5=very)	4.09	.95	3.24	.94	3.50	1.04

**Parental Involvement**

64.71% of special education teachers reported that parents had access to their child's present level statement in advance for an IEP planning meeting. Teachers were also asked about parental involvement in the IEP meeting. 94.12% answered that parents usually present their child's strengths in the meeting, and 100% said that parents usually present the weaknesses. 91.18% of teachers agreed that parent suggestions are helpful, 96.96% agreed the suggestions were taken seriously, and 94.12% agreed that they were implemented. Teachers were almost unanimous in their reports of parent suggestions being respected and valued by the IEP team.

**Problems and Suggestions**

Teachers were asked about several areas in a free response format. They were instructed to report any problems they experience in that area, as well as any suggestions they may have.

Creating an IEP: Many teachers reported problems with non-academic areas such as behavioral, emotional, and social. It was said that these areas are not focused on enough in the present level statement, and that baseline data for them is lacking. Another teacher mentioned that writing goals for these areas in a measurable way is difficult. An additional major problem that teachers reported is simply not having enough time. One response stated "by far, my biggest challenge when planning, setting up IEP meeting, having the meeting, and writing an IEP is finding the time to do it all, while still having students all day and meeting their needs". It was also reported that there is not enough time to keep up with the changes in the laws and forms. One teacher said that the appropriate services are always being provided, but formally documenting everything properly can be a challenge.

Discussing a child's IEP with their parent: One problem mentioned by teachers was "dealing with unrealistic parent expectations". Examples of this included parents expecting their

child to be college ready when it is simply not realistic, and parents wanting their child to gain independence yet not wanting to reduce any assistance. Other teachers reported the opposite, that parent expectations were too low for their child. One teacher reported struggling with “how much control to give parents in making good evidence based decisions for their children”. It was also mentioned that language and content need to be simplified so that parents can better understand. Many teachers emphasized the importance of being in contact with the parents prior to the IEP meeting, to avoid surprises. It is helpful for parents to be aware of their child’s IEP content and teachers to be aware of parents’ concerns ahead of time. Another teacher suggested that building a relationship with parents can be very helpful.

Following an IEP: A large problem reported in this category was simply not having enough time. “Time for actually following IEP’s has nearly been eliminated due to classroom duties”. Several teachers said that they struggle finding time to work on all goal areas. Several more described that gathering enough data on goals in the time allotted is also incredibly difficult. It was mentioned that these problems are especially pertinent in the general education setting. Another interesting point made was that it is sometimes hard to follow the IEP if students are having a bad day.

Present level statement: A common complaint of teachers is that when students move from one school to another, there is not enough information and data in their present level statement to be able to properly provide services to the child. One teacher reported that behaviors are often not included in the present level statement, making it difficult for teachers to know what to expect from the child.

Goals and objectives section: A common theme amongst the problems with this section was difficulty writing measurable goals, especially for subjective areas. Another teacher

expressed difficulty with writing behavioral goals for the unique needs of students with ASD. It was recommended that extra training and practice on goal writing may help with this problem. There were also complaints of having to follow specific formats and standards that simply do not fit certain situations, and more flexibility was requested. However, another teacher said it would be helpful if goals were written more specifically, to aid inter-teacher communication.

**Measuring progress:** Many teachers in this sections suggested finding a process that works for the individual teacher to make data collecting easier and faster. The positive responses to this section, stating that progress monitoring is easy and making suggestion to others, came from teachers with 10 years or more of experience, while the more negative responses came from the teachers with less than 10 years. This suggests that data collection may be a process that gets easier with experience, when the teacher “streamline(s) a process that works for (them)”. Teachers with less experience suggested that better measuring tools may help.

**Accommodations and modifications section:** The main problem brought up in this section is that there are often too many accommodations and modifications on a child’s IEP and they are too general. One teacher said that this section is often based on what works for most students and another mentioned that it is usually focused on the general disability of the child. Instead accommodations and modifications should be grounded in the specific needs of the individual student. One teacher mentioned that certain IEP forms do not allow for unique options, which may be a problem. Another response stated that the excess of items in this section negatively impacts the child’s progress towards independence.

**Additional comments or suggestions:** One interesting additional comment is worth mentioning. “Most of the issues I have are with making sure that all members of the IEP team

are doing their part. Everyone needs to be accountable. That really has nothing to do with the IEP itself, but with everyone surrounding it”.

## **Discussion**

### **Teacher Experience and Training**

There was a large variety in years of experience ranging from 1 to 40. 97.05% of respondents report they are at least “somewhat confident” in their ability to create a quality IEP. Teachers with 10 years of experience or more were more likely to say they were “extremely confident” in their ability (80%) than those with under 10 years (35.71%). The correlation of 0.30 between years of experience and level of confidence was not significant, but there is a trend to be noticed. Teachers with more experience seem to be more confident in their abilities to create and follow an IEP. Higher confidence does not necessarily imply better work, though. Ruble et al. found “evidence for poorer quality IEPs with more experience” (Ruble et al., 2010, p. 1465). The actual quality of the IEPs created by teachers was not examined in this study, only the teachers’ own perspective of their work. It is possible that with confidence comes less rigor. This may contribute to lower quality IEPs, however, more research is definitely required.

Teachers’ evaluations of their IEPs in terms of IDEA legally required components and NRC Recommendations were very high. Not only did they agree that these requirements and recommendations are important, but answered that the components are usually present on real IEPs. These findings contradict those of Ruble et al., who found that “the IEPs of students with autism do not meet the requirements/recommendations of IDEA and NRC indicators and are sorely in need of improvement” (Ruble et al., 2010, p. 1465). Teachers did rate these components as important and present, but their ratings were lower for how usefully described the components are. It is possible that teachers are trying to include all the necessary pieces of each

child's IEP, but are for some reason not producing satisfactory work. Rubel et al. (2010) identified data collection and goal measurability as major areas in need to improvement. Respondents to the survey seem to agree that these areas pose challenges. It was said numerous times in the free response section that social, emotional, and behavioral goals, which are all very important for kids with ASD, are difficult to make measurable. Teachers are struggling to gather baseline data to develop a quality present level statement and satisfactory goals, and then are having difficulty creating and following through with a plan for progress measurement. It seems from the responses, that these processes get easier with experience, but in the beginning of teaching can be quite a challenge. Ruble et al. (2010) gathered from their results that "in order to make these educational decisions, teachers need support on how to collect, interpret, and link data to educational practices, and how to alter educational strategies based on child progress" (p. 1466). This suggests that special education teachers may need to be more specifically taught a process to carry out these difficult procedures and make these important decisions, at least until they gain experience-based judgement.

Many problems in the special education process may begin to be explained by lack of IEP training for teachers. Less than half of the respondents to the survey received any kind of formal IEP training in their undergraduate degree. Although more teachers received formal IEP training in a graduate program, special education teachers are not required to have above an undergraduate degree in most states. Additionally, a general education public school teacher not pursuing a graduate degree in special education will still most definitely teach a child with an IEP at some point in their career, and will need to follow that plan. Therefore, IEP training needs to be accessible to all teachers. It is peculiar that undergraduate teacher certification programs are not required to train future teachers for a major legally mandated part of the job.

Training through school professional development programs, and informal training on the job are by far the biggest sources of IEP education for respondents. This is concerning because if bad practices are happening, they are simply being passed from generation to generation of teachers without being corrected. Considering the trend of teachers with more experience creating lower quality IEPs, while maintaining high levels of confidence, it is important to ensure they are not the only source of IEP training for new teachers. Educators may be confident in their knowledge of IEPs, but if never formally taught satisfactory methods, they may be causing major problems in the special education system.

With the growing population of children with ASD, it would also be very helpful for teachers to be trained on methods that specifically work for this population. Many teachers expressed their difficulties with ASD in the free response section of the survey. It appears to be quite challenging for the teachers to address the behavioral, emotional, and social needs of students with ASD. However, there are many strategies for working with this population, and teachers may simply need training on this. According to the results, other areas that teachers would like additional training in are collecting data, the present level statement section, and the Goals and objectives section of the IEP. These are very important parts of the IEP process, and, as previously mentioned, have been found problematic (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). More training was specifically requested in these areas, showing the true desperation of our educators.

A reasonable way to remedy this problem would be to start mandatory IEP training in undergraduate teacher certification programs. Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) found that additional training for teachers, of any kind, vastly improved the quality of IEP development. This supports the case that special education teachers are not getting enough initial training, and would definitely benefit from more. If specific training models are developed that focus on data

collection, the present level statement, and goals and objectives, while incorporating helpful ASD practices, it would be extremely helpful to teachers. If the training models were then applied in undergraduate teaching programs, the special education system could see significant improvement in IEPs.

### **IEP Form**

Teacher's largely agreed with the IDEA legally required components, however it seems that those are not the only demands they must follow when creating IEPs. In addition to the National Standards, there are standards for each State. The Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE) with Related IDEA Federal Regulations is a 175 document of guidelines that special education teachers in Michigan must follow in addition to (Michigan Department of Education, 2016). According to the free response answers provided by special education teachers surveyed, IEP forms are tedious and difficult to fill out correctly. One teacher stated "the services are being provided, you just have to 'say it in a certain way' or it isn't (technically) happening". This demonstrates that perhaps some issues with the IEP system are in the paperwork and not in the actual services provided to the students. It is possible that teachers know that services are important, and are in fact providing them, but may have difficulty conducting proper documentation.

Teachers express feelings of being confused and limited by the procedures they are required to follow. One troubled teacher explained her frustration saying "it seems like there can be too many little things that can be missed, too much to remember. Changes are made and you don't know how to deal with them". Frequent guideline changes for filling out the IEP forms has caused problems for teachers. One teacher said forms are modified every year or more frequently, making it difficult to get comfortable with the process. Another brought up that



sometimes they are not informed of changes in the law, leaving them unable to follow said alterations. Electronic forms appear to be especially restrictive. Teachers mention having to click boxes and fill out sections on a child's IEP form that are not applicable to that child. IEP forms also sometimes do not have options for components that may need to be added. It was mentioned several times that IEPs are not individualized enough for each child, and the unique needs of students with ASD are not met. The limitations of some forms contribute to this problem. Many teachers expressed this theme of being challenged by such stringent standardized forms. However, one respondent did mention that the detailed nature her district's form is helpful in creating satisfactory IEPs. This disparity may come from the fact that every school district uses different forms, and perhaps some work better than others. 84.85% of surveyed special education teachers responded that there should be a universal form. It seems only logical that research should be done on the most effective IEP form, and that it should be universalized across districts and States.

A universal IEP form would be helpful for a number of reasons. Understandably, it would create a more equal special education system across districts and states. The same tools would be used on students in all schools. This would also reduce confusion between school districts when students move, a problem mentioned. Student teachers could be trained with a universal form and be well prepared for what they will be using in their career. There would also be no confusion if teachers change districts. Producing the best possible standardized form would ensure that teachers are being faced with the least amount of difficulty and students are receiving the best quality education. More detailed research needs to be conducted on problematic factors of the form, such as level of detail and flexibility, and how they affect IEP quality. The form should be tested to ensure that problems are fixed. This would potentially

correct the current system of constant changes to forms and procedures while they are being used. A universal form would ensure that each district was following procedures in line with the law. When significant, necessary updates are made to the law, the universal form could be updated and necessary information and training could be provided. This would ensure teachers' continued understanding on how to use the form.

Although a universal form would be incredibly helpful for the special education system, it may not resolve as many problems for students with ASD. A specific version of the form for ASD would also potentially be very helpful. Many teachers mentioned being unable to meet this population's unique needs with the tools available. If teachers are struggling to fulfill the needs of these students within current IEP forms and procedures, changes should be made that incorporate strategies that are known to work. Future research should be conducted on what factors contribute to the most successful IEP forms for students with ASD. This research should then be applied to creating a quality universal form for these students.

### **Parental Involvement**

Parents were another detail of the IEP process that appeared to create problems for teachers. Many respondents discussed difficulty with "unrealistic parent expectations". These expectations for their child are apparently anywhere on the spectrum of too high to too low. This is yet another factor to consider in the difficult process of planning the individual education for a student with the varying specialized needs of ASD. Parent complaints and lawsuits are the primary source of knowledge on issues in the IEP system. However, parents may simply be confused and misinformed. In White (2014), 46% of the investigations made on parent complaints came out with facts in favor of the schools. The results found that in most cases parents "misunderstood or disagreed with the school about the content of students' IEPs", or

were unfamiliar with “legal and educational procedures” (White, 2014, p. 84). Parents also won less than half of cases that were taken to court over their child with ASD’s IEP (Etscheidt, 2003). This raises questions on the validity of parent concerns.

Although teachers seem aware of these problems, they still appear committed to incorporating parent suggestions. The responses almost unanimously agreed that parents make suggestions for their child, and that these recommendations are helpful, taken seriously, and implemented. However, one teacher stated that deciding the extent to trust the parents in knowing what will be best for their child can be challenging. Parents being extremely motivated to advocate for their child, yet not fully understanding all the factors involved can put teachers in a hard place. Experienced teachers offered suggestions towards improving this situation. The recommendations were all related to making the parents feel more comfortable with the teachers and the IEP process. It was suggested that teachers should try to build a relationship with parents and keep an open line of communication. If both teachers and parents are aware of each other’s thoughts and concerns ahead of time, it can improve the quality of the IEP meeting and creation process. It is also suggested to simplify language and content of the IEP for parents, so that they can better understand. These simple steps may improve the quality of parent teacher interaction, leading to parents better trusting school systems, feeling more comfortable with the IEP process, and raising fewer complaints.

Parents who are confused and upset about the IEP system may not know about the resources available to them. There are parent training and education centers in each state, like the Michigan Alliance for Families, that are there to support families through the IEP process. Teachers probably do not have the time to completely explain IEPs to parents, and should

recommend these centers. The more educated families become about the IEP process, the more they will feel comfortable with it.

### **Time and Uncontrollable Factors**

One responding special education teacher powerfully stated “if teachers write full, complete IEPs for students the way they should be written, and a teacher has a full caseload, it is very difficult to follow all of the details of every students IEP”. A large contributing factor to this problem seems to simply be not having enough time. Many teachers revealed struggles with time in the free response section of the survey. When asked what problems are experienced when creating an IEP, one teacher answered “finding time to do this within the school/work contract”. Gathering baseline data, interpreting it, meeting with parents and the IEP team, and writing an IEP are very time consuming tasks. Not having enough time to fulfill these duties would definitely lead to problems in IEP quality. It was reported by another teacher that there is not enough time to write IEPs, follow IEPs, and tend to every child on a caseload’s needs. Teachers usually have fairly large caseloads, meaning that they have many IEPs to create, manage, and implement. Caseload limitations vary from state to state and program to program, but for example, for students with specific learning disabilities “the teacher shall be responsible for the educational programming for not more than 15 different students” (p.109). This means that a teacher may be handling the IEPs of 15 students at a time. This creates a huge amount of work for teachers. The IEP process alone is incredibly time consuming, but in addition to that, teachers must educate their students and manage their classroom each and every day. Many survey respondents mentioned struggling to find time to properly follow IEPs while fulfilling all classroom duties. There may not be time for following detailed goals and gathering progress data in a special education teacher’s busy day, leading to problems in the IEP system.

When working with a population of children with autism spectrum disorder, there are many uncontrollable factors that may impede a teacher's ability to follow an IEP. Although caseloads are usually somewhat smaller for students with ASD and there are often para professionals to assist, teachers are still responsible for multiple children at a time. Each child with ASD has unique needs and often requires individual attention. These factors can make it difficult to provide the ideal service to each student on a caseload. A survey response requested "reducing caseloads" for "more frequent and appropriate contact" with students. This would increase the amount of time teachers can spend with each student, and therefore increase the quality of service. Children with ASD also often have difficult problem behaviors that can take time out of the day to deal with. A child with great behavior still has bad days when they may be difficult to work with. A survey response said that IEPs are "difficult to follow when students are having a rough day". This teacher suggests "doing a range of hours for support" on a student with ASD's IEP to account for some of the uncontrollable variables that make following the plan difficult. Special education teachers could also use more help with their ASD students in the classroom, this would give them more time to focus on both creating and following quality IEPs.

The last topic worth mentioning is the trouble that some teachers experience in working with the IEP team. There seems to be disagreement on IEP creation and distrust in follow-through. Team members may have different opinions on what components are important for an IEP. These disparities could result from differences in training or experience, and may lessen if the training process is somewhat universalized. However, teams will always have disagreements and it is important for teachers to keep the best interest of the student in mind when creating an IEP. One teacher reported that her biggest problem in the IEP process is trusting other members of the IEP team to do their part. These kind of conflicts are natural and can only be fixed to a

certain extent, but the situation is important to consider. Communication problems between teachers can prevent students from receiving the best quality education possible. It is unavoidable that teachers need to work together in the IEP process, so it may be important for them to work to improve their relations. Schools may want to consider incorporating team building training for IEP teams. It could be helpful for IEP teams to gain comfort with each other and develop trust.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, special education has come a long way in the US, due to the IDEA. However, many problems still exist with the system of developing and implementing individual education programs, especially for the growing population of students with autism spectrum disorder. Parent complaints and lawsuits have brought light to this problem, and IEP quality has undergone investigation. A gap in the literature was found, and this research aimed to fill it by exploring the perspective of special education teachers, the people creating and using the IEPs every day. Teachers were asked about their opinions of both the IEP system and their own work in it.

A few important things were uncovered. Respondents agreed with the literature on what aspects of the IEP process are difficult and need improvement. These areas are collecting data, the present level statement section, the goals and objective section, and progress measurement. Teachers also seemed to struggle with specific needs of students with ASD. It seems that both special education and general education teachers are lacking in formal IEP training. This may be causing inadequate practices to start and continue in the IEP system. This could potentially be corrected by an improvement in IEP training for student teachers in their undergraduate study.

There are also many difficulties with filling out the IEP forms, which may be improved by further research on procedures that work and application of that knowledge to a universal form.

Parental involvement in the IEP process was also found to be difficult for teachers. It was suggested to keep open and comfortable relations with parents to improve this. It also may be beneficial to better educate parents on the special education system, or refer them to a source that can. A large uncovered issue, not previously found in the literature was the challenges teacher's experience with aspects of their job and the IEP process that are simply out of their control. The main problems appear to be having enough time to perform all job duties, trying to follow a strict plan with an unpredictable population, and trusting other members of the IEP team to do their part. These problems may be lessened by decreased caseloads and increased assistance, but further research should be done on how realistic expectations are of special education teachers. These professionals have a very difficult and extremely important job of educating youth of varying abilities. It is important to continue exploring how to support these educators in their difficult task, to ensure all students in the US are getting the quality education that they deserve.

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## Appendix

## Survey Questions:

**How many years of experience do you have working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder? \_\_\_\_\_**

**Throughout the entire survey-keep in mind the IEPs you have observed and created for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Please answer the questions according to your own experiences.**

**IDEA legally required components of IEP**

**Rate the following from 1-5 for A, B, and C (1=not at all, 5=very)**

Components 1-7 are legally required of IEPs- in your experience:

- A. How important is it in providing service for a child with ASD?
- B. How often is this component present on IEPs for children with ASD?
- C. How usefully described is this component on IEPs for children with ASD?

1. The child's present level of performance A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_
2. Measurable annual goals A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_
3. How the child's progress toward meeting annual goals will be measured, and when periodic reports on the progress will be provided A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_
4. The special education and related services and supplementary aids and services to be provided to the child A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_
5. Program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the child A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_
6. The extent to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular classroom A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_
7. Individual appropriate accommodations that are necessary to measure the academic achievement and functional performance of the child on state and district wide assessments A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_

Are there any other components that you believe should be legally required?    Y    N

If yes, please explain

**National Research Council Recommendations for the IEP**

Rate for A B and C like above.

1. Parental concerns are described A \_\_\_\_\_ B \_\_\_\_\_ C \_\_\_\_\_

**Rate the following from 1-5 for criteria D, E, and F (1=not at all, 5=very)**

- D. How important goals pertaining to this component are to the overall education and well-being of a child with ASD
- E. How often goals pertaining to this component are present on an IEP for a child with ASD

F. How practically described and measurable goals pertaining to this component are on IEPs for children with ASD

2. Content includes goals that reflect:

- Organizational skills and other behaviors that underlie success in general education program D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_
- Expressive, receptive, and non-verbal communication skills (as appropriate) D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_
- Social skills to improve involvement in school and family activities D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_
- Symbolic functional communication system D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_
- Basic cognitive and academic thinking skills D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_
- Fine and gross motor skills to be utilized when in engaging in age appropriate activities D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_
- Replacement of problem behaviors with appropriate behaviors D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_
- Engagement in tasks or play which are developmentally appropriate including an appropriate motivational system D \_\_\_\_\_ E \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_

**Knowledge of IEP formation:**

- Are you comfortable with your school district's IEP form?
  - How comfortable are you 1-5(1=not at all, 5=very) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Is it a similar model to what you were trained with? Y N
  - Would it be better to have a universal IEP form? Y N
- How comfortable do you feel filling out an IEP form?
  - 1-5(1=not at all, 5=very) \_\_\_\_\_
- How confident are you in your abilities to create a good IEP?
  - 1-5 (1=not at all, 5=very) \_\_\_\_\_
- What kind of training did you receive in creating IEPs? (select **all** that apply)
  - a) Formal training in undergraduate education courses
  - b) Formal training in graduate education courses
  - c) Formal training in professional development
  - d) Informal training on the job
  - e) Informal training through observing others
  - f) No training at all
  - g) Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Do you feel like you could benefit from more training on IEP development and use? Y N

G Which parts of the IEP are you most comfortable with (rank 1-7) (1=least, 7=most)

H Which parts would you like more training on (rank 1-7) (1=least, 7=most)

- G \_\_\_\_\_ H \_\_\_\_\_ Collecting baseline data for IEP planning and creating
- G \_\_\_\_\_ H \_\_\_\_\_ IEP formation meeting

- G \_\_\_ H \_\_\_ IEP implementation follow-through
- G \_\_\_ H \_\_\_ Present Level Statement section
- G \_\_\_ H \_\_\_ Goals and Objectives section
- G \_\_\_ H \_\_\_ Accommodations and Modifications section
- G \_\_\_ H \_\_\_ Special Education Services and Programs section

**Parent Involvement:**

- How helpful are parent suggestions? 1-5 (1=not at all, 5=very) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Do parents usually present child's strengths? Y N
  - Do parents usually present child's weaknesses? Y N
- How seriously are parent suggestions taken?
  - Rank 1-5 (1=not at all, 5=very) \_\_\_\_\_
- How often are parent suggestions implemented?
  - Rank 1-5 (1=not at all, 5=very) \_\_\_\_\_
- Do parents have access to present level statements in advance for an IEP meeting  
Y N

**OPINIONS**

What problems do you experience with the following areas and what ideas/suggestions do you have for improvement? (Open-ended) (Answer whatever applies to your experience, **do not feel required to make comments for everything**)

- When creating an IEP?
- When discussing a child's IEP with their parent?
- With the present level statement?
- With the goals and objectives section?
- With measuring progress?
- With the Accommodations and Modifications section?
- Additional comments/suggestions