Learning to Write IEPs: A Personalized, Reflective Approach for Preservice Teachers

The Individualized Educational Program (IEP) is the foundation of instruction for individuals with disabilities. Therefore, learning to write and attach meaning to these documents is critical for preservice teachers. This article explores an approach to teaching IEPs during teacher preparation, which encourages preservice teachers to view the IEP as a relevant, purposeful document; reflect on their own learning styles; and consider the impact of the IEP on the learner. Implications for using this approach in teacher education programs are discussed.
version of the IEP (Bauwens & Korinek, 1993; Council for Exceptional Children, 1998). With the ongoing changes in IEP format and requirements, developing IEPs can be a challenge.

Teachers sometimes disregard the value of or write unusable IEPs (Dragosow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001; Hess & Brigham, 2001; Paul et al., 1997; Hufner, 2000; Menlove et al., 2001; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000; Smith, 1990). Smith suggested that IEPs were not, as they were intended, guiding instructional practice. If the IEP is to be useful, prospective teachers must see it as a meaningful document and attach meaning to the process of writing IEPs, rather than considering it a rote exercise in paperwork (Bauwens & Korinek, 1993; Smith, 1990). Clearly, teachers need appropriate training and preparation for the IEP process (Menlove et al., 2001; Shriner & Destefano, 2003; Wers, Mamlun, & Pogoloff, 2002).

How can we prepare future teachers to write effective IEPs and to consider the IEP process meaningful? This article describes the experiences and reactions of preservice teachers as they wrote personal IEPs as part of an undergraduate special education course. They were encouraged to be reflective about their own strengths and needs. The experience provided a constructivist opportunity for learning about IEP content and construction.

The Process

The project was conducted with a class of 19 undergraduate preservice teachers in their junior year of a dual certification program in elementary education and special education. All of the students in the class were women. The course was entitled Instructional Practices for Students with Disabilities and was designed to prepare future elementary and special education teachers to plan, design, and implement instruction using various approaches and strategies appropriate to children's needs. The special education component of this teacher education program had only been in place for 2 years, and this was the first time the course was offered at the university. Students had previously received information about IEPs and the IEP process in the special education program. The previous semester, they had learned about assessment and its relationship to designing instruction. Students had seen several IEPs for children in their field experiences and had some minimal experience with writing goals and objectives for children based on assessment data. This, however, was their first experience in writing an IEP. At the beginning of the semester, I informed students that one in-class assignment was writing a personal IEP. They were told to include realistic goals and objectives for themselves, including what they would be able to accomplish during the semester. I gave students a blank IEP form from a local school district to use. Because there were already many outside assignments for the course, this project was to be completed in class, with outside time only if necessary. Working on the IEP in class encouraged student discussion and support and provided time for the instructor's support. This was not a graded assignment; without the pressure of grading, we expected students to write realistic, achievable goals. I hoped that through the open-ended nature of this assignment, students would realize the difficulty in determining whether they had achieved the goals and objectives written into their IEPs. In class discussions, we talked about writing goals and objectives in observable and measurable terms. As part of the course, several in-class group activities were conducted in which students used case studies to practice writing goals and objectives in the appropriate format. The project's objective was for students to experience writing an IEP from a personal perspective. Students were told to keep notes on their progress toward goals and that the entire packet would be collected at the end of the semester.

At the end of several class sessions, time was allocated for students to update their IEPs; during this time, students discussed their IEPs and supported one another. Because this was the first time this project was implemented, students were asked to complete open-ended questionnaires at the end of the semester. Participants responded to the following questions:

- What did you learn about writing IEPs from this experience?
- What did you learn about yourself from this experience?
- What did you learn from this experience that you will use when writing IEPs as a teacher?
- List three of the most important things to consider when writing IEPs, in priority order.

Students also completed course evaluations, collected at the end of the semester. In these evaluations, students were asked to provide written, open-ended feedback about the overall effectiveness of the course. Many comments were relevant to the IEP activity.

Participant responses from questionnaires and course evaluations were coded and analyzed to determine recurring themes. To enhance the validity of the data through triangulation, data from these different sources were compared using data displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Several themes emerged. What follows is a discussion of these themes, presented in the words of the student participants.

The Importance of Individualization

A primary theme emphasized by these prospective teachers was the need to focus on individualization and children's strengths when writing an IEP. Students stressed that information in IEPs must be specifically tailored to
the abilities of each child. Consider preservice teachers’ comments about what they learned:

- Goals are broader than objectives—importance of identifying strengths and weaknesses.
- I learned that IEPs are important for special-needs students. It is extremely important that the goals and objectives are observable and measurable. The IEP really decides on how the child will receive help. This is why it is extremely important to write the IEP correctly.
- [I learned] that I need to know children’s strengths and needs. Need to focus on child’s academic needs and the level they are currently at. With this info, create goals and objectives.
- [I learned] to take time and write it very carefully. The student’s strengths and weaknesses should be very well thought out and prioritized properly.
- Remember to accentuate the positive and use strengths in intervention.
- Organization of information is important.
- Strengths are important to note so that they can be used to help the child learn.

The core purpose of the IEP is individualization. Bawens and Korinek (1993) believed that focusing on individual abilities is necessary for IEP quality. In previous field experiences, some students observed that many IEPs from a school district look almost identical. Therefore, learning the importance of individual strengths and needs was critical for these preservice teachers.

The Challenge of Writing IEPs

The process of writing personal IEPs helped preservice teachers become more acutely aware of the knowledge and information they needed to write IEPs for their students. Many of the participant’s comments focused on the need to know the strengths of their students. The following comments indicate what preservice teachers learned:

- I found writing the IEP was very hard and took a very long time. It was also hard because I am now a college student and most the sections do not apply. It was extremely hard writing realistic goals because I feared having to meet those goals.
- Picking out relevant information to include in the IEP is difficult.
- I never knew how much an IEP included until I had to fill this out for myself. It goes into a lot of detail, and everything is planned out very thoroughly in an IEP.
- Writing an IEP is time consuming and requires detailed record keeping to be accurate.

Obviously, preservice teachers found writing IEPs challenging and time consuming. As they combined their prior knowledge with this new experience, they became aware of the many variables involved in writing an IEP for each individual child.

Reflection

The process of writing personal IEPs encouraged reflection. Student responses indicated that they learned a great deal about themselves as learners. The project helped them analyze their strengths and needs and find strategies to meet these needs. Consider the following comments:

- I worked very hard to meet several of my goals this semester. I made myself daily and weekly schedules to help with my organizational skills and time management. These schedules also helped me a great deal with my goal to handle stress more appropriately. Keeping a time schedule helped keep my stress levels down a great deal! I feel making goals for myself gave me something to work for.
- I have become better at organizing my schedule and calendar and have become more aware of my time management. However, I still rely on being under pressure in order to complete an assignment. My friends have become more of a support because I ask them to remind me about doing my work. My schedule is still busy, but I have learned to plan ahead before making plans.
- I learned how to look at areas I am having trouble in and break down how I can improve in that area.
- I learned that I need to work more on my writing.
- I learned a lot about myself. I realized what my weak and strong points are in academic settings. It allowed me to see where I need help in my personal goal attainment. It also helps me to see what is important to me in academics.
- [I learned] that I need to improve in my grammar and writing structure.
- I learned that it is extremely hard to improve on my handwriting skills.
- I have the ability to start with strengths to help work on weaknesses.

Several responses suggested that this experience helped these preservice teachers think about the IEP process from the perspective of the children they will eventually teach. For example, one student stated, “Maybe I will be more sympathetic towards the child’s small progress.”

The Challenge of a Personal IEP

Students found it extremely difficult to write an IEP for themselves. Some thought that many of the items required
on the form were not relevant to their situation. Others indicated that it was difficult to reflect on their own abilities and translate those to the IEP format. Some typical comments were

- Making this IEP personal was very hard. Thinking about realistic goals for myself worries me because I know that I will not progress much toward them (at least at this time in my life).
- It is hard to write an IEP on yourself—hard to identify one's own strengths and weaknesses objectively.
- I learned that writing one for yourself is harder than writing one for someone else. I learned that it's not difficult; it's just a lot of work.
- I found this experience to be extremely difficult. I was not able to relate my own learning styles and abilities to the special ed program.
- I thought doing this IEP was confusing because the majority of sections did not apply to me. This made it hard to complete. I also felt like it was rather repetitive.

It was interesting to find their comments on the difficulty of writing personal IEPs embedded with specific reflections about what they learned from the experience. Perhaps the challenge of reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses was something difficult at this point in their experiences.

**The Need for Collaboration**

Participant comments indicated that this experience could help preservice teachers recognize the need to work with others when preparing IEPs for students. In previous courses, we had discussed the importance of collaboration for implementing effective programs for children with disabilities. The experience of writing an IEP independently reinforced awareness of the need for collaboration with other professionals. For example, students wrote,

- Inform the [general] ed teacher—Find out students' present level of educational performance—Get as much information as possible.
- [I learned] that the special education teacher, general ed teacher, counselor, etc. (team) all contribute to write a child's IEP.
- When writing the IEP the parent(s), general education teacher, special education teacher, and child study team needs to be there.

Collaborating on the development of IEPs can increase the meaning and relevance of the process (Bauwens & Korinek, 1993). This is especially true in light of the increased practice of inclusion. General education teachers are now required to participate in IEP development, making it more important for both special and general educators to have collaborative skills. Smith and Brownell (1995) wrote, "The importance of the IEP in directing, documenting, and facilitating collaboration of a student's education cannot be minimized or ignored" (p. 1).

**Implications for Teacher Education**

One of the major benefits of learning about writing IEPs was the constructivist nature of the process. Students clearly gained new insight about themselves and the IEP process from combining knowledge and experience. This opportunity directed their focus to the specific knowledge they would need as future special education teachers, such as the need for individualization, the need for collaboration with other professionals, and the need to keep accurate records. It also reinforced concepts learned in other courses.

Through this personal experience, preservice teachers learned about some important and specific elements of goal setting, such as the need to focus on strengths, the need for collaboration in writing IEP goals, and the need for IEP goals to be realistic and achievable; Edelen-Smith (1995) saw these as critical components for writing effective IEPs. As prospective teachers learn to write IEPs, they should focus on content, as well as process.

The personalized aspect of this strategy helped future teachers relate to the children for whom they will develop programs. They made connections about the importance of focusing on student strengths and the challenges that arise when trying to meet children's goals and objectives. Ensign (1999) had similar findings in a study of students in an undergraduate course. Those students participated in an assignment writing IEPs as they developed one of their own skills over the course of the semester. The study indicated that students "developed empathy for special education students as well as learned to construct an IEP" (p. 11).

A personalized approach to learning about IEPs encourages introspection. Focusing on their own strengths and needs helped these students reflect on their own abilities as learners and as prospective teachers. As they struggled to match their own abilities to the IEP format, some discovered that many of the items in an IEP may not be relevant for every child. Perhaps this experience will encourage further goal setting and ongoing reflection, skills that are stressed in many teacher education programs.

Several disadvantages were apparent in asking preservice teachers to write IEPs for themselves. First, this approach was time consuming. With so much to include in a course on instructional practices, it was difficult to allocate time for this demanding activity within the constraints of a one-semester, 3-hour course. Second, students were initially resistant to the activity. It was interesting that most found it extremely difficult to write an IEP for
themselves. Is this possibly a result of the higher-level thinking skills required for meaningful, in-depth reflection? Perhaps this challenge was instrumental in moving students to another level of thought, making it an extremely valuable strategy.

As the professor of the course, I discovered the need for some adaptations when using this strategy in the future. The assignment should be graded and part of the course requirements to encourage students to allocate time for developing the IEP outside of class. Also, assigning a grade may reinforce the importance of the assignment and the need to do it well. As the instructor, I found that doing this sporadically in class made it difficult to assess and monitor students’ progress on their goals and objectives. If students were required to submit regular reports on progress toward goals and objectives, they might be more conscientious about ongoing implementation of their IEPs.

Conclusion

This article describes one approach to teach special and general education preservice teachers how to write IEPs. This information may help teacher educators provide prospective teachers with the knowledge and skills to write useful and meaningful IEPs for their future students. In addition, this approach provides possibilities for encouraging reflection and higher-level thinking in teacher education courses, contributing to preservice teachers’ personal and professional development. This constructivist strategy may be adapted and used by teacher educators to prepare future teachers with the skills they need to plan instruction for children with disabilities in their classrooms.

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References


