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## Student Involvement In IEPs


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# Student Involvement In IEPs

## Abstract

There has been a recent initiative for students to be involved in their Individualized Education Plan. The goal is for students to become self-advocates and learn to develop goals that pertain to their interests. The study examined this process of including students by addressing three questions. First, does student involvement in their IEP lead to greater mastery of IEP goals? Second, does student involvement in their IEP impact academic achievement? Third, in what ways does the Self-Advocacy Strategy, IPLAN, increase student participation in IEP meetings? Three students participated in the study by providing inventory on their strengths, weaknesses, and what helps them learn. They then turned that information into a presentation of their choice to present at their IEP meeting. Each student differed in the amount of inventory they provided, support that was required to complete the presentation, and understanding and application of the inventory in the classroom.

## Keywords

Individualized Education Plan, contract, portfolio, presentation, academic achievement

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## **Introduction**

Student involvement has been a recent trend in education. Many counties are piloting different programs that allow special education students to be more involved in the IEP process and meeting. Previous studies mainly focus on older students, middle and high school, and there is little research at the elementary level. The goal of this process is to develop more of an awareness in students and to allow them to provide input to make learning more meaningful to each individual. By doing this, teachers hope that students will be able to create their own goals based off of personal interests.

## **Purpose**

In this research study, there were three questions that were addressed. The first one focused on whether or not student involvement in their IEP leads to greater mastery of their IEP goals. The second question addressed whether or not student involvement in their IEP would impact academic achievement. Finally, the last question focused on a specific program, IPLAN, and whether or not it would increase student participation in IEP meetings.

## **Context**

Being at the elementary level, students had never been exposed to thinking about themselves in the way they were asked to. What are your strengths? What are you weaknesses? What helps you learn? Goal setting was a part of the plan to get student involved, but being that that students had not been exposed to this before and they were not developmentally age appropriate to do so, the students did not create goals. Based off of this study, it would be important to consider a more strategic way to gradually implement this process so students can develop the skills necessary to actively and effectively participate in their IEPs.

## **Background**

In 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized calling for an increase in student involvement in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Martin, et al. 2006). An IEP is necessary if a child receives special education services. The goal of the IEP is to provide services for the child to learn more effectively by addressing their needs and how they will be taught the required curriculum (GaDOE.org, 2012). This process of identifying the students' needs and the services to be provided requires a team of teachers, parents, administrators, and others to determine what is best for each child. Involving students in the IEP process provides the opportunity for them to work on self-determination skills such as self-advocacy and goal setting (Test & Neal, 2004). However, students are often overlooked as self-advocates for their own learning (McGahee, Mason, Wallace, & Jones, 2001). They may not know exactly what it

is they need, but they do know what they want and what they are interested in. If they do not, it is important for them to know how to advocate for themselves.

### **Five Step Plan**

A five-step plan was implemented in a study by special education teachers to allow students to be involved in their IEPs and possibly even leading the meetings (McGahee, et al., 2001). The five-steps include implementing a student-led IEP program, helping students understand their IEPs, engaging students in developing and writing their IEPs, preparing them to participate and/or lead their meetings, and ongoing self-advocacy. By students being aware of their disability and the accommodations they receive, research suggests multiple benefits and increased performance of students (Nolan-Spohn, 2016). It may lead to increased engagement, involvement in the classroom, and enhanced academic skills. The study done by Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson (2004) supports the idea of increased performance of students by showing that students who led their IEPs were better informed about their own disability and accommodations, and they improved their self-advocacy.

### **Collaboration**

A majority of the previous studies focus on transitional planning for older students. There has been little research done with elementary students. A study done by Williams-Diehm, Brandes, Chesnut, and Haring (2014) discussed student and parent IEP collaboration. The purpose of this study was to determine differences, if any, between rural, urban and suburban educational environments regarding special education teachers reported levels of student and parent involvement and participation during IEP meetings. The study showed that there was a higher level of student and parent involvement and participation from a rural school district. Compared to suburban schools that participation was 18.9% higher and 64.9% higher than suburban schools. In another study researchers observed 109 meetings and determined that special education teachers talked 51% of the time, family members 15%, general educators and administrators 9%, support staff 6%, and student 3% (Martin, et al., 2006). Questions were given at the end of the meetings to identify understanding, and students scored the lowest compared to other participants in the meeting.

### **Goal Setting**

In order to prepare students to lead their IEPs, teachers must be well informed and prepared to teach the students the skills they need in order to do so (Scott, 2012). The purpose of Scott's study was to evaluate special education teachers' self-efficacy with teaching students what they need to know to lead their meetings. The objective was for the students to start developing their own goals.

That way it was more meaningful to them. Goal setting is the amount of growth that is established as a minimum for progress (Jenkins & Terjeson, 2011). Teachers' self-efficacy, when supported by their administration, was higher and resulted in a more positive view of performing new instruction tasks, increased preparedness, and students who are able to advocate for themselves (Scott, 2012). In some studies, teachers set aside advisory times to meet with the students to discuss their interests, strengths, weaknesses, and needs (Johnson, Serrano, & Veit, 2013). Along with this, some, but not all, students were involved in their IEP by also developing a presentation to provide their input in the meetings (Johnson et al., 2013). Results showed that the students who were involved in the IEP process developed a further understanding of their needs and the supports and accommodations they receive. Students feel more invested and important in the process when they are given the chance to participate in choosing their IEP goals since it is based on their interests and preferences (Arndt, Konrad, & Test, 2006).

Another study examined whether young children can set goals for learning (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003). The specific instrument used to measure this was the Self-Determination Learning Model of Instruction. With this question in mind, another question arose as to whether teachers can implement this model with a variety of subjects and settings with students having diverse learning needs. The model, if used appropriately, can be used to support the development of self-determination and student involvement. It was shown that students as young as five years of age were able to successfully set and achieve their goals through the model and with the support of their teacher. One example was with a group of third grade students and mathematical problem solving (Fuchs, et al., 2003). Self-regulated learning strategies (SRL) were assessed and incorporated goal settings and self-evaluation. SRL should be used as a motivational tool for students to achieve goals. Another tool that was found effective is called Interactive Hypermedia (IHP) (Lancaster, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2002). It was used with secondary special education students, and it allows students to learn through a video as though it was live instructions. It is a different form of instruction that can be provided to students. On the section on goal contributions, students contributed to the goals and objectives of the IEP between 60-100% of the time, and the total number of goals ranged between 3 and 9.

**Student Behavior.** With setting goals and the teacher feedback, teachers are also able to use goal setting as a means of producing desired changes in student behavior (Martens, Hiralall, & Bradley, 1997). Not all students in special education are there just for learning support. Goal setting can be beneficial for students with emotional behavior problems. In this study, the teachers did three things. They chose up to four behaviors, specific to each child, to increase. Goals were set for

the number of times the teacher was to praise the student during each during each class segment. Finally, the teacher was given feedback by an observer at the end of the day explaining whether she did or did not meet her goals based on observations. The findings suggest that goal setting and feedback for students and teachers can be effective to produce desired student behavior. The more a teacher gave positive feedback to a student, the fewer behavioral problems manifested. Teachers who did not give positive feedback to their students as often tended to see more behavioral occurrences during the day.

A study conducted by Dalun, Wehmeyer, and Li-Ju (2005) investigated behaviors of parents and teachers in fostering self-determination skills of elementary and secondary students. One important factor is that the study compared cultural differences between parents and students from the United States to parents and students from Taiwan. Teachers and parents of secondary school students reported higher levels of engagement than teachers and parents of elementary students. There was an evident relationship between self-determination and more positive adult outcomes, and it has produced an emphasis on instruction to enhance and promote self-determination skills and student involvement. Altogether, teachers' efforts were higher than parent efforts when it came to promoting self-determination and being involved in the transition process from one school to the next or to the work force. This was believed to be because parents did not know how to foster self-determination skills. The researchers suggested the need to examine more closely the relationship and interaction between the students and parents to see how they are fostering self-determination at home. Overall, the research showed that both countries had very similar values for fostering self-determination even though there were some differences. The U.S. did have higher levels of engagement in fostering self-determination and behaviors at both the elementary and secondary levels.

### **Portfolio Assessment**

Portfolio assessments are a collection of products created and completed by students, and they allows teachers, parents, students, and others to observe changes over time (Gencel, 2017). They are simply an evaluation of learning. Portfolios are to be completed during the learning process, and it is an opportunity for the students to provide direct evidence of their learning. They can be especially beneficial in special education due to the documentation, planning, and progress monitoring of the IEP within it (Carpenter & Ray, 1995). They provide the students with choice and often motivate them. Portfolios have been seen as a way for parents, teachers, and students to view the student in a more positive, rather than negative, way (Stockall, Dennis, & Rueter, 2014). However, portfolios do reveal their mistakes and weaknesses (Gencel, 2017). Since work samples are included,

teacher, parents, and students are able to evaluate their answers and mistakes made. By compiling a portfolio assessment, it requires the students to self-evaluate and enhances their metacognitive skills. Metacognitive skills are characterized by self-awareness, and this leads to feelings of self-confidence and self-efficacy. The purpose of Gencel's study was to see the impact of portfolio assessments on metacognitive skills and attitudes towards a course. Portfolios were determined to have positive effects for each of the participants.

Children as young as kindergarten have been shown to have the ability to assist in creating their own portfolios (Laski, 2013). A teacher did this with her kindergarten class, and she met with her students in small groups once a month to look through their finished work. Each student chose pieces to put in his or her portfolio. Because of this, her students were able to exhibit a greater ability to evaluate their work. The role of the teacher began by being very guided, but as the year went on the students were gradually able to take responsibility.

### **Self-Advocacy Strategy**

Most of the research done for the self-advocacy has been on students 14 years of age or older due to the revision of IDEA in 1997 (Test & Neal, 2004). Students above the age of 14 are required to be invited to join their IEP meeting. In Test and Neal's study, the Self-Advocacy Strategy was used with four disabled students to engage them in the IEP. The Self-Advocacy Strategy is designed to help students become more involved in the process. Students must be willing to learn and have the ability to communicate whether it is through verbal communication or gestures (Division on Career Development and Transition). As a result of using this strategy, more goals and information were guided towards the students' strengths and weaknesses. To discuss this, the teachers conferenced with the students with participation strategies and to provide more information.

On a similar note, an elementary school in Virginia decided to involve each of their fourth-grade students with a learning disability in their IEPs (Zickel & Arnold, 2001). A team of teachers and administrators created self-advocacy circles (SAC). This is where the students draw a circle on a sheet of paper. From there they divided the circle into four quadrants: reflecting, goal setting, speaking up, and checking. It was implemented with the whole class, general and special education students, with a role-play using SAC. After hours of performing this strategy, the fourth graders with disabilities were able to demonstrate their ability to use this strategy effectively. As the students began to get more comfortable with the SAC, they were introduced to their IEPs. From there, they began to develop their goals, and some students even wrote them with little support. Being involved in the meetings could be as simple as stating their goals. The IHP, discussed under "Goal

Setting,” was developed and tested by the Self-Advocacy Strategy (Lancaster, et, al., 2002). Comparing IHP to SAC, the study found that the IHP is as effective as teaching with the SAC. The IHP just requires at least three hours of live instruction.

### **IPLAN**

IPLAN is a five-step process and is a self-advocacy strategy used in a study involving three special needs students (Hammer, 2004). The first step stands for inventory of student strengths, weaknesses, goals, and choice. Second, they provide the inventory information during the IEP meetings. Next, ask questions and respond. Finally, summarize the IEP goals. These are standard procedures for an IEP meeting, but teachers had to make sure their students were prepared to participate in the process. As a result of this study and using the strategy, there was an increase in the number of times the students verbally contributed to the meeting. Before the meetings, the teacher spent twenty minutes with each student to discuss what would take place, had them state the steps in the strategy, and role-played with the student to provide practice and insight to what it would look like. As a result, the strategy was seen as effective in setting goals and helping them become more involved in their IEP meeting.

### **Self-Determination**

A study done by Arndt, Konrad, and Test (2006) focused on the impact of self-determination skills and the impact it has on student achievement. The purpose of the study was due to lack of implementation after the self-determination movement that was promoted and intended to increase student attendance in their IEP meetings. They chose five students, each with a different disability, to participate in the Self-Directed IEP. As a result of preparing the students for this, the results indicate a functional relationship between the implementation of the Self-Directed IEP and increases in student participation. Students were able to generalize skill acquisition to their real IEP meetings.

Lane, Carter, and Sisco (2012) completed a study on involvement of paraprofessionals in self-determination instruction for students with high-incidence disabilities. The purpose of the study was to examine paraprofessional’s perspectives on promoting self-determination among these students. There were seven component elements of self-determination that they used. They include choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy and leadership, self-management and self-regulation, and self-awareness and self-knowledge. Each paraprofessional who was asked to participate in the study completed a two-page printed survey consisting of two sections and twenty-three questions. The result showed that the seven components were slightly higher



than average on the midpoint scale. This means that the paraprofessionals reported that they sometimes taught each of the seven elements of self-determination.

The Self-Determination Synthesis Project (SDSP) for students with disabilities is used to promote student self-determination skills (Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, and Algozzine, 2004). The purpose of the intervention was to improve, expand, and accelerate the use of this knowledge by the professionals who serve children with disabilities, their parents, and students with disabilities. In developing self-determination goals and objectives, one needs to identify skills comprising self-determination, decisions have to be made, skills need to be taught to individual students, and information regarding instructional material needs to be obtained. The result in completing the above is self-determination. That includes teachable, measurable skills such as choice-making, problem-solving and leadership skills in their role of developing their own IEP transition goals.

From previous research and the findings it is reasonable to conclude that student involvement in IEPs has been effective for special education students in their learning and skills. Students were not only able to voice their opinions, but they were given different options for how to learn, developed self-advocacy and self-determination skills, and learned how to set goals and objectives.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to examine elementary students' involvement in their Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and how they can more effectively advocate for themselves. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that every student, regardless of age, must be invited to their IEP meeting to ensure their preferences and interests are considered. An IEP is an important legal document for each student with a disability in public school, and it ensures that the student is receiving specialized instruction. Being a self-advocate makes students aware of their rights and gives them the chance to make choices regarding their own lives (Hammer, 2004). That raises the following questions:

1. Does student involvement in their IEP lead to greater mastery of IEP goals?
2. Does student involvement in their IEP impact academic achievement?
3. In what ways does the Self-Advocacy Strategy, IPLAN, increase student participation in IEP meetings?

One goal of these questions was to determine the impact of student involvement in the IEP process by measuring growth in each of their goals. By doing this, there was hope to find students taking more initiative and being more involved in their

learning. Being in a small, specialized classroom setting, students need to not only be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, but how they learn best and how to take control of their learning. One goal of using IPLAN was to promote active participation in the IEP process and work in self-advocacy skills.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The county in which the study was conducted is located in the north Georgia region. Nearly 36,000 students were being served between 42 public schools in the county (Public School Review, 2017). There was a minority enrollment of 56%, consisting mostly of Hispanics. There was a student-teacher ratio of sixteen to one. There were 27 public elementary schools which provided services to nearly 18,000 students. In the county the study took place, the minority enrollment was 58%, but the student to teacher ratio remained the same.

The study was conducted in a public elementary school in the north Georgia region. It was a rural, Title I school with approximately 624 students enrolled in Pre-K through 5th grade. The racial demographics of the student body included 64.9% White, 29.1% Hispanic, and 3.7% African American. Of this student population, 61.5% were recipients of free or discounted lunch (SchoolDigger, 2017). According to the Advanced Education Incorporation Executive Summary (2015), of this student population, 67% were economically disadvantaged, 12% were students with disabilities, and 22% were identified as Gifted.

The classroom of the study consisted of 23 students from various Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade classrooms. All students were between 5 and 10 years of age. Of the 23 students, 16 were boys and 7 were girls. Also, 17% were members of a minority group, all Hispanic. The classroom ranged with multiple disabilities including Autism (AU), Significant Developmental Delay (SDD), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Mild Intellectual Disability (MID), or Other Health Impairment (OHI). There were 9 SDD students, 8 SLD students, 2 AU students, 2 OHI students, and 2 MID students. These students received special education services in reading, writing, and/or math. Not all students were served in reading, writing, and math. Depending on the student's needs, an IEP determined the segments in which they received small-group instruction. Participation was only from the students whose annual review IEP meeting was held within the time frame of the research study. This consisted of a total of 3 students, 1 girl and 2 boys. Of these students, 2 were served for reading, writing, and math. Only 1 student was just served for reading and writing. The participants consisted of 2 SLD students and 1 SDD students. There was 1 first grader, 1 second graders, and 1 third graders.

## Materials and Measures

**IEP.** Each of the participating students has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) which is an important legal document for defining the term “free appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment (GaDOE, 2017). IEPs are developed and reviewed annually and must be effective at the beginning of each school year. Each student’s document contains a statement of the student’s present level of performance (PLOP), the student’s annual educational goals, special education supports and services that are provided for that student, modifications and accommodations, how and when the goals were measured, and transition planning (Stanberry, 2014). A sample IEP form can be found in the Appendix A.

**Contract.** Since each student has an IEP, the parents and students signed a contract stating their agreement for the students’ participation in their IEP. The contract is simply a letter that states the purpose behind student involvement, how they would like to be involved, and what the student did to be involved in the process. It is a contract because the parents and the students needed to agree to the process. See Appendix B for the contract that was provided.

**Portfolio.** The portfolios was the main tool for assessing mastery of IEP goals and achievement. Each of the participating students had a portfolio containing their IEP goals, the progress made, and work samples. The goals were put in layman terms for the students. There was a sheet for the student to track their own progress. They tracked their progress using different forms of graphs including bar graphs, line graphs, pie graphs, or by a percentage. All of the data was also used for the teachers and parents to use and refer to in the meetings. Along with that, the students had a goal checklist. When the student meets the goal, he would be able to check that goal off the list. The final items that were included in the portfolio are student work samples. All of the student’s work was kept in their portfolio as another means of keeping track of progress and as evidence of the data. The portfolio was kept by the teacher in a hanging file in the student work and data bin. The bin and file is easily and readily accessible for IEP meetings.

**Presentation.** When the students attended the IEP meeting, they had some sort of presentation to demonstrate their understanding of their learning. This can be done as a PowerPoint, a poster, or any other forms of presentation. The student shared their presentation with all of the attendees of the meeting to show their understanding of the goals, the progress they have made, and what they need to continue to work on. A rubric from Learn with Two Rivers was completed by the special education teacher during the meeting on the presentation. See Appendix C.

## **Procedures**

Data was collected during the 2017-2018 school year. IRB approval was needed and obtained before the study began. After, parents of the students were contacted to discuss a contract, or agreement, which informed the parents and students of the steps that took place to prepare the student to be involved in the IEP. The study was conducted in a resource special education classroom. Students involved met once a week for 20 minutes to discuss their IEP goals and progress one month prior to their annual IEP meeting. That means that students met with the special education teacher three weeks prior to their meeting. The fourth week of the study was the actual IEP meeting. Once the school opened in the mornings, there was a thirty-minute block before the students needed to be in their homeroom classes. Each student had a designated day and time they met with their resource teacher to discuss these goals and the progress they had made. That was not only a time for the students to understand their goals and the progress they were making, but it was a time for the students to express themselves. During that time, students discussed any areas they were struggling in, what benefited their learning, what was not benefiting their learning, their interests, and any other concerns they may have had. The idea behind having the students come in the morning was so they would not miss any instructional time, whether that was with their homeroom teacher or resource teacher.

The teacher referred to the student's portfolio to show progress and to address any concerns with the student. The portfolio contained work samples and data that had been collected throughout the year. The binder was a part of the portfolio. In the front of the binder there were two different ways for the students to state their goals. The first is a sheet where the students would write four educational goals pertaining to their IEP on a sticky note. The other included those goals, but it also expanded upon why the student chose them. That also helped in determining mastery of those goals. The student began by stating the goal, writing why they wanted to improve, how they were going to improve, and if they were successful or not. Behind the goals, data would be included. Student recorded graphs of homework completion, writing, math, reading, and behavior are the different forms of data collection. These graphs are teacher created and were completed by the student in class when an assignment is done. Depending on the student and the services in their IEP, they may have all forms of data collection or they may have one. Some students were receiving special education direct instruction services for reading, writing, and math while others may have only received direction instruction services for reading.

From the data and their IEP goals, the students created a presentation of some sort to present their knowledge and understanding at the meeting. These

morning conferences occurred until the student's annual IEP meeting. All students had a different annual IEP meeting date. This was based off of when they had their initial IEP meeting. The IEP team must meet and submit the IEP exactly one year after the initial meeting date. There, the students were asked to present their project to share their progress with the IEP team which included other teachers, parents, and administrators. The student started the meeting off as an introduction because they were sharing their knowledge and provided their input to their learning needs. While the student was presenting, the teacher completed a rubric (Appendix C) to evaluate the child. This determined mastery of their participation. If the student showed up and presented their strengths and weaknesses and their growth the teacher determined that mastery.

Once the student presented the project, they went back to class. Their participation in the IEP meeting was based on their project that showed their strengths, weaknesses and growth from the perspective of the student. From there, the parents provided any input on things they noticed about the child at home or any concerns the teacher should know about. The teacher recorded those in the IEP. From there, the teacher pulled the student's portfolio to provide student work samples showing their strengths and weaknesses. The portfolio also contained student-recorded data to track the progress being made. This data is student-recorded data for their homework completion, behavior, spelling, math, reading and writing. During that portion of the meeting, the team discussed the next steps that would benefit the student. After the meeting, the teacher met with the student one more time in the morning to discuss any changes that were made to the IEP. That should keep the students aware of any changes in goals, accommodations, etc.

### **Results**

Out of all the students in the class, the data that will be collected on students' growth by measuring percentages of their IEP goals. That will be done in their portfolios by a percentage along with different graphs completed by the students.

### **Sample**

From a group of 23 students, 5 students were selected to participate in their IEP meetings. Students were chosen based off of when their IEP annual reviews were being held. The 5 students' selected annual review dates fell within the data collection period of the study. In order to participate, parents had to sign a letter of consent, and the teacher had to get consent from the students as well. Out of the 5 students, only 3 participated. One student who was chosen was unable to participate due to a personal conflict. The consent form was not returned in time. The other student refused to participate in the study. Consent was given by the parents, but the student denied participation.

## **IPLAN**

Each student was asked the same questions during their meeting times with the teacher. These questions were asked so the student would be prepared to create a presentation for their IEP meeting. It would also prepare them to discuss these topics with everyone in attendance. The questions are listed below:

1. What is one thing you want to improve?
2. Why do you want to improve that?
3. How are we going to improve this?
4. What do you think are your strongest study or learning skills? Or What are you good at? How do you learn best?
5. What are your weakest study or learning skills? Or What do you need to work on?
6. What skills do you want to improve on or learn that will help you do better in school?
7. Can you tell me about any activities or materials that teachers have shared with you that help you learn in school?
8. Are there any after-school activities, such as sports or clubs that you would want to get involved in?
9. What would you like to be when you grow up?
10. What size learning group works best for you?
11. Are there any tools that you have learned to use that help you when you take tests?
12. Is there anything else you want to tell me about school?

Student 1 answered these questions more in depth than students 2 and 3. She seemed to understand the questions that were asked, even if she did not fully understand the question. She was not hesitant to ask for clarity to become more confident in her answers. She seemed to have the most understanding and a better grasp of what was being asked and required of her to better her education. With this understanding, she was able to take more initiative in class, perform better on her homework assignments, and apply the learning techniques more to her overall education. She recognized when she made a better grade on a test or assignment, and she verbally communicated with the teacher different ways that helped her and applied them in class.

Student 2, being the youngest, showed no interest in class or assignments unless the topic dealt with the comic strip project that he was working on or his PE class. When discussing academics, the student seemed uninterested until the teacher connected comic strips to his academic work. He then seemed to be able to make the connection, but it did not transfer to the actual academics in class. Until then,

any time he was asked a question, he would make comments about all of the non-academic aspects of school: lunch, PE, recess, and seeing his brother in the hallway. For the teacher to gain any relevant information regarding the topics at hand, the teacher had to ask many specific questions based off of the original questions listed above. After discussing these questions, in class, the student would not communicate his needs or questions to the teacher even after stating the few tools that helped him. When he was given access to those tools, he did not utilize them properly or consistently. Attention and motivation were lacking during times of discussion with the teacher and applying it in the classroom.

Student 3 was similar to student 2 in regard to having limited understanding. For example, the teacher knew that student 3's strong subject was math. When she asked him if he was good at math, the question seemed to make a little more sense to him. He responded with a general statement about how much he enjoyed math, and his excitement level rose the more math was brought up in the discussion. From there, student 3 was able to tell the teacher specific things that he likes about math and specific things he is better at in the subject. Since discussing his strengths in math, his scores have continued to increase and his confidence has noticeably risen as well. He began to take more initiative to help other students, consistently ask more for assistive tools and instructions, and volunteer to answer or solve problems in a group setting. Regarding the student's weaknesses, he knew that reading and spelling were two areas that he struggled with, but he struggled to communicate the problems that he was experiencing. The teacher would ask very detailed and specific questions, just like with student 2, for the student to understand the questions that were being asked. This provided him examples since it is such a large content area.

As for all three students, when they were asked what their strengths and weaknesses were, they all had no problem stating at least one weakness. When it came to strengths, the students, some more than others, needed some additional prompting with more specific questions. When it came to the presentation for the meeting, all three students prepared their presentations with more support than anticipated. Being younger in age, the students have not had much, or any experience creating something like this. Student 1 was the most independent, while students 2 and 3 required ample amounts of support to not only come up with what to include but with how to create it.

### **Impact on Academic Achievement**

**Spelling Tests.** Spelling weakness was a common trend among the three students in the study. When having discussions with each individual student, each communicated a lack of confidence in their spelling abilities and mentioned

wanting to learn to spell more words at some point in our conversations. Each student's initial score on their spelling tests were low with student 1 scoring the lowest and student 2 scoring the highest. With the three students being of different age and grade levels, they all have individual spelling lists and words that differed from each other. When analyzing these scores, students' self-determination skills were easily noted in the way they impacted that academic achievement.

Student 1 appeared to be the most self-driven of the three students. Before the research study, she would practice her spelling words only one night per week, showing low motivation and low test results. During the study, she would practice her words three nights per week and showed more motivation and dedication to learn her words while in class. There were many times the student would ask the teacher if she could practice her spelling words after completing the assigned work for the day, or she would arrive to class and share different ways that she could improve upon her spelling words or methods that helped her the most while studying at home. The student noticed that when she studied she performed better on her test, and when completing her graph saw a definite difference in the scores and highlighted areas on the graph. She noticed when her score remained static or did not progress due to her lack of studying or hard work in the classroom. She would verbally communicate with the teacher what change she noticed in the score. On days it increased, even if only by a small amount, the student commented on how it was better than the time before. If her score ever decreased, she was more hesitant to comment, but she would say how she would try better next time. If her score stayed the same, she would express how she was at least glad it did not decrease. There came to be a point three weeks into the study when the student's score stayed the same before it decreased again. Around the time the student's scores were decreasing, her parents were in transition making educational decisions to move her from a public school to a homeschool environment.

Student 2 was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, making him the youngest student in the study. When it came to spelling, the reason he wanted to learn to spell better was to help his brother with a personal project and create a comic strip. He was able to recognize that he needed to improve his spelling, but it was in the context of personal interest rather than a benefit in improving his education. When it came to practicing his spelling at home, he was inconsistent with turning his homework in. He would take the spelling tests but would often ask the teacher questions, such as if there was a pattern to the words, or if there was a silent "e" to certain words. When he would graph his scores, the student would act uninterested and did not notice any trends in his scores. When practicing his words in class, his productivity level was low, and he would constantly need someone there to remind him to work



or stay on task, or he would just sit for long periods of time at his desk waiting on further instruction or motivational prompts.

Student 3 was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade but showed similar characteristics as student 2. He failed to understand the purpose of identifying strengths and weaknesses and applying it to his education. The student stated in the discussions that he was wanting to learn to spell better and more confidently, but after more probing questions about the reasons for wanting to spell better, the student stated that he was mainly focused on improving his reading skills. When it came to spelling tests, this student did not do anything to change his study habits or spend more time learning his spelling words. One motivator for this student, more than the other two in the study, was a reward system. A reward system was created three weeks into the study to see if the student's motivation would increase. The reward was one that they could receive a sticker for that recognized their achievements on their last test. In order to get the sticker, they would have to make a 100% on the spelling test by spelling all of their words correctly. From that point on, the student showed an increase in his scores, motivation, and maintained consistency on his study habits and test scores.

**Math Assessments.** Of the three students who participated in the study, only two of them, students 1 and 3, received direct instruction services in the resource room for math. During the study, all concepts that were on the assessments each week were taught and practiced in class throughout the week.

Student 1 would complete all of her homework, but it was often not done correctly. She said that it was difficult for her, and the instructions would be modified or changed at home to make it easier for the student to complete because she wanted to perform the homework that way. When it came to tests, student 1 would struggle, and she would need constant assistance with reading, determining how to solve the problem, and coming up with an answer. During this time, all concepts that were on the assessments each week were worked on in class. It started with one concept, addition and subtraction with regrouping, followed by the same concepts for the next three weeks but in a different format. She was able to use the computer to help her read the questions and then write the answers on the paper. The last four assessments incorporated multiple concepts that tie into addition and subtraction with regrouping, then the assessments incorporated in place value, rounding and finding the sum or difference. When first switching to this assessment, student 1 really struggled. She was having to put all of the concepts together. On the next three assessments, the student increased her score, with the assessments being repetitive.

Student 2 was more motivated to learn and perform better in math when he was able to identify and utilize the tools that helped him the most. When it came to identifying the tools that helped him, the teacher had to use more detailed and probing questions to spark the student to identify the more beneficial tools for his learning. After the student had more understanding, he was able to list that number charts, base ten blocks, and Prodigy helped him in math. It was found that he was more excited to complete assignments, his scores increased, and his confidence in recognizing the tools and utilizing them also rose.

**IEP Meeting.** Each student was involved in their meeting as a part of the IPLAN strategy, but each meeting unfolded differently. The purpose of IEP meetings is to focus on areas of need. Having the students provide input was a way to increase the amount of positivity. Each student did a different form of presentation. Some displayed more information than others. Student 1 was the most excited, confident, and engaged in the whole process. She was nervous at first, but she was able to present her project to the IEP team members. The student created a poster board that displayed her information. The information she shared was typed by the student using a writing prediction software, Cowriter, that is one of the tools the student said helps her in class. In the meeting, she introduced herself and presented her information. When she was done, the student talked about the entire process and how much she enjoyed the process.

Student 2 was not as engaged as student 1. He was excited when he was told he could create a comic strip to present at his meeting. The comic strip displayed limited information about the student's education. To create the comic strip, the student needed a lot of support and assistance to complete it. When asked what he wanted to share with everyone, he listed three topics out of everything that was discussed in the meetings. The three include seeing his older brother at school, liking math, and playing at recess. His introduction to the meeting was short and concise. He read his comic strip and was done. He thoroughly enjoyed seeing his mother and sharing it with her.

Student 3 was the most nervous when it came to presenting his project. He created index cards to share his information with his mother and the IEP team members. This student also needed a lot of assistance to complete it. Since spelling is an issue, the student needed assistance with spelling each of the words. He would state the sentence, and the teacher would type it on the computer for him to copy. He then was able to choose pictures to go along with his sentences. When he presented his information to the IEP team, he was nervous but read his cards to everyone. He often looked to the teacher for reassurance on what he had written. He enjoyed showing off the pictures he had on the cards. He shared information

that included that he likes math and that Prodigy is a math game that helps him. He stated that he enjoys art. He enjoys reading, but he needs help with it.

### **Discussion**

All students should be aware of their learning, strengths, and weaknesses to be able to advocate for themselves. As for special education students, being aware of their disabilities and accommodations is important to maintaining ongoing self-advocacy and increasing performance in the classroom (McGahee, et al., 2001). With this study, having been working with a variety of age groups at the elementary level, it is hard to compare the outcomes to the studies working with high school students. Students at the high school level have had more experience in school and have been exposed to more tools and accommodations. From Mason, McGahee-Kovac, and Johnson's study (2004), the students involved were able to increase their performance in the classroom by leading their IEP meetings. From doing this they were better informed about their disability, accommodations, and how to advocate for themselves.

In the current study, Student Involvement in IEPs, there was an increase in the amount of information each student was able to provide and how they applied it. For example, the first grade student and second grade student provided limited, relevant information. Most of the relevant information received was prompted with many questions by the researcher. As for the student in third grade, she had the most school experience and was able to state more information than the other two students. In a general way, without knowing she did, the student was able to create one goal to go towards her IEP. This was the spelling goal. She ended up doing better on her spelling tests but not when writing sentences or stories. Through the process, she had taken more initiative to do better on this goal, even though it did decrease towards the end due to outside factors. She improved her self-advocacy, but she was not more informed about her disability.

When it came to the IEP meeting, again, the students differed based off of age and understanding. However, there was only one student who somewhat understood the purpose of discussing strengths and weaknesses and talking about her education. From the steps taken in the process of the study, students did not seem to develop a further understanding of their needs and supports and accommodations they receive. Andt, Konrad, and Test (2006) concluded that students felt more invested and important when they were given the chance to participate in choosing their IEP goals since they are based off of their interests and preferences. Since students 2 and 3 barely provided any academic insight without prompts, it was difficult to even discuss topics on academic abilities. The whole process was very guided by questioning to lead students to discuss academics.

Goals were not even discussed besides student 1 wanting to increase her spelling. Students felt the most important and invested when they were able to create their project and share it with the IEP team to just inform them of the discussion with the researcher. As stated before, most of the research done on student involvement in IEPs has been done on student 14 years of age or older. Test and Neal (2004) stated that this is because of these students are required by IDEA to be invited to join their meeting. Goals developed were created based off of students' strengths and weaknesses. Just like Test and Neal's study (2004), students conferenced with the teacher to provide more information. The difference was that the students did not create their own goals as they did in the previous study.

As for the IPLAN strategy that was intended to be used, it could not be thoroughly executed with any of the three students due to the fact that none of the students helped to create and write their IEP goals. Out of the five steps in Hammer's (2004) study, the students in the current study were not able to summarize their IEP goals because they did not develop them. This was due to a lack of understanding from the students on their learning. The students needed more support than anticipated to even discuss strengths, weaknesses, and what helps them learn. However, the students were able complete the first two steps of providing information to share at their meetings and then actually sharing the information at the meetings. Considering this was the first time any of the students even had conversations like this with their teacher, this helped them become more involved in their IEP meeting. As the students continue to be involved over the years, they will increase their knowledge of their education and hopefully be able to help develop their own goals. Developing their own goals is based off of a deeper understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, but none of the students in the study were at the point to be able to develop their own goals. The closest one to it was student 1, and she did well stating strengths and weaknesses, but was unaware or barely stated accommodations that helped her.

### **Limitations**

This study presented different limitations throughout its completion. One limitation of the study was the short duration to collect data. Due to the time frame of the study, research was only able to be collected for six weeks. Not only that, but the time period in which the students were to meet with the teacher in the mornings before class difficult to keep consistent. Student 1 was regularly on time to school and readily participated in the time allotted. The other two students who participated were not consistent with their arrival times to school, and instructional time was taken away during their class time to compensate and conduct the discussions.

Other limitations consisted of the age of the students and the sample size. Since the students were so young and had less school experience, it took a lot more support from the teacher than anticipated. The teacher had to consistently provide more prompting to obtain the desired information from each student. The other limitation was that the sample size was very limited. The class only consisted of 23 students, and only 5 students' IEP meetings were scheduled to be held during the duration of the study.

### **Implications**

Due to the timeframe and age of the students, the students did not help create their own goals. At this age, it is important for the students to understand their strengths and weaknesses, what helps them learn, and how to help themselves. One aspect of this study originally was for students to help create goals, but they never did due to a lack of awareness about their own learning. It is a well-designed program with good intentions, but the full program, including goal setting, would be more beneficial for students in grades 6 through 12. Elementary students would benefit from being introduced to the beginning stages of the program at a young age so that they can develop a deeper understanding and eventually be able to effectively develop goals. In order to help students identify and improve their individual strengths and weaknesses at an earlier age, the methods are recommended to be altered.

Altering methods to the program at an early age will allow students to develop more of an awareness which can eventually lead to goal setting. They will come to discover their own academic abilities more in depth at a younger age without introducing too much information and instructions to them early on and discouraging them from growing. Once they have progressed confidently through this stage, whether it takes some longer than others, the students can then progress to setting a few minor goals in order to give them more confidence and a familiarity with the system. Once they have accomplished these minor steps, they will be older and more confident in themselves and would be able to handle a more intricate load in regards to their goals and handling their IEP meetings.

### **Conclusion**

Getting students involved in their IEPs is important for students with disabilities. Some may need more support than others, but it is important for students to take more control of their education and understand their strengths and weaknesses and what helps them learn. If they can do this at a younger age, then as they get older they can contribute to developing their individual goals. It is important for the students to be aware and have a purpose behind their learning. This would be beneficial for all students, especially with learning disabilities, so

that way they are more aware of their education and how to advocate for themselves as they get older. Due to their cognitive learning disabilities, it makes it harder for the students to develop beneficial learning goals.

### **Future Research**

Further research would be beneficial with a longer duration of time to ensure consistency and a deeper understanding of each students' achievements and success. It would also be more beneficial to gain more knowledge on students in elementary school since there is limited research aimed specifically towards this age group. One suggestion would be to differentiate the program based on different age groups. Younger age groups should be provided more assistance and support to learn how to identify strengths, weaknesses, and different tools that benefit them in the classroom. As the students get older and become more aware of their learning, students could begin learning how to develop and set goals for their IEP. By the time students begin to transition to middle and high school, they will have a better understanding and foundation to know and set their educational goals with limited to no assistance.

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**Appendix A.**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Meeting Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**\_\_\_\_\_ SCHOOL SYSTEM  
INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP)**

IEP Meeting Date:		Purpose of IEP Meeting: Initial <input type="checkbox"/> Annual Review <input type="checkbox"/> Amendment <input type="checkbox"/>		
Student Name:		Date of Birth:	GTID#	
Eligibility Category(s):		Most Recent Eligibility Date(s):		
School:		Grade:	School Year:	
Parent(s):				
Address:			Email:	
Phone (home):		(work):	(cell phone):	

**TEAM MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE**

REQUIRED MEMBERS	ADDITIONAL MEMBERS
Parent:	Name/TITLE:
Parent:	Name/TITLE:
Local Education Agency Representative (LEA):	Name/TITLE:
Special Education Teacher:	Name/TITLE:
Regular Education Teacher:	Name/TITLE:
Student (age 18 or if transition is being discussed):	Name/TITLE:
Agency representative (responsible for transition services):	Name/TITLE:

**I. PRESENT LEVELS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND FUNCTIONAL PERFORMANCE**

<b>Results of initial or most recent evaluation and results of state and district assessments:</b>
<b>Description of academic, developmental and/or functional strengths:</b>
<b>Description of academic, developmental and/or functional needs:</b>
<b>Parental concerns regarding their child's education:</b>
<b>Impact of the disability on involvement and progress in the general education curriculum (for preschool, how the disability affects participation in appropriate activities):</b>

## Appendix B.

### Student Assent Form

**Title of the Study:** Student Involvement in IEPs

**Researcher:** Lauren Pounds, Curriculum and Instruction, [lhoun9287@ung.edu](mailto:lhoun9287@ung.edu), Josh Cuevas

The following script will be read to students and they will provide verbal assent (or refusal) with another teacher, Mrs. Houston, present to confirm their response.

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Ms. Pounds for a project at the University of North Georgia. Mrs. Houston is here to vouch that you agreed to be involved in the study.

I am asking you to participate in the study to see if being involved in your learning will make a difference. We will see how you like to learn and what you think you need to learn.

**Procedures:**

Three weeks before you IEP meeting, we will meet in my room for one morning a week. Here, we will talk about your IEP goals, what you're good at, and what you struggle with.

**Confidentiality:**

Your study data will be handled as privately as possible.

**Sensitive/Reportable research information:**

We will keep your study data as private as possible, except for certain information that we must tell someone about.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary, meaning you do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate and change your mind, you may stop at any time.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about this research project you may ask Ms. Pounds at any time.

**Statement of Consent:**

I agree to participate in this study, and to the use of this study as described above. The signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to Dr. Lisa Jones-Moore, Chair of the Institutional Review Board, University of North Georgia, Middle Grade Education, 82 College Circle, Dahlonega, GA, (706) 867-2969, [IRBchair@ung.edu](mailto:IRBchair@ung.edu)

## Appendix C.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

	4	3	2	1
<b>IEP Awareness</b>	I understand my IEP and can explain the IEP and its purpose to others.	I know the meaning of IEP and the purpose of an IEP meeting.	I know the meaning of IEP.	I do not know what an IEP is.
<b>IEP Participation</b>	I have discussed my IEP with my teacher(s) and have contributed information about myself for the development of my IEP. I communicate and take ownership of this information at my IEP meeting.	I have discussed my IEP with my teacher(s) and have contributed information about myself for the development of my IEP.	I have discussed my IEP with my teacher(s), but I do not participate in the meeting.	I do not participate or attend my IEP meeting.
<b>Knowledge of IEP Content</b>	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP. I have assisted in their development and am able to explain them.	I can name the accommodations and goals in my IEP, but I do not have a voice in the development.	I know that I have accommodations and goals, but I do not know what they are.	I do not know what is in my IEP.
<b>Abilities and Disabilities</b>	I am able to explain my strengths and challenges and its impact to members of my IEP team and to others.	I am able to describe my strengths and challenges and explain its impact to members of my IEP team	I have an understanding of my strengths and challenges and how it impacts me.	I can recognize some strengths and challenges and am unsure of how it impacts me.