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CHATing About Learning Plans

Abigail Lopez

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L EARNING disabilities affect a large portion of the United States' population, yet they do not get much attention. Learning disabilities such as ADHD, autism, and dyslexia become evident when a child is in school, and teachers must work to find the best way to teach each student so that they may be successful, usually with what's called an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The objective of said document is to make sure that the student is successful in their education, despite their disability. To produce an IEP, students must be tested for learning disabilities. If they test positive for any disability including: vision and hearing problems, dyslexia, autism, ADHD and many more, they must have an IEP. Using Cultural Historical Analysis Theory (CHAT) we look at the production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology of genre. In this CHAT, I will discuss each of these terms in the case of Individualized Education Plans.

The Making of an IEP

The first step of the IEP process is production. Production deals with the format, tools and practices used to create the genre at hand. Before the comprehensive learning plan is created, a referral for testing must be written. According to Steven J. Bachrach, MD of kidshealth.org, "The referral process generally begins when a teacher, parent, or doctor is concerned that a child may be having trouble in the classroom." Then, a team is assembled to test the student for learning disabilities. This team comes up with a Comprehensive Evaluation Report (CER), which Bachrach explains as a document that, "offers an educational classification and outlines the skills and support the child will need." At an IEP meeting, the team looks at these CERs to determine whether the student should be recommended for a full-time special education classroom, or if they just need additional resources in a general education setting. The times that these meetings are held depend on the school district. Some districts schedule their IEPs during after school hours, while others have certain times during the day for these meetings. It is an official meeting, and each person attending takes notes to make sure that they are staying on track and remember their ideas for when it comes time to actually type up the IEP. These findings are a crucial tool in the production of an IEP.

Preparation

Similar to production, representation refers to the planning of a genre. In the world of IEPs, representation deals with the preparation teachers to create a functioning education plan for their student. Mary McLaughlin, a special education teacher wrote on teacher.org that teachers must review assessments made from the child's performance, and review what they believe are the strengths and weaknesses of the student, then develop a goal for the classroom. Teachers tend to know their students well, and are often able to spot when a student needs a little more help. The increase in classroom sizes in recent years, however, have made it more difficult for teachers to work one on one with their students, so less prominent disabilities will often slip through the cracks. The teacher must complete their own assessment of the student's performance, and bring their findings to the meetings, which are held as often as needed for a particular student. The teacher's ideas for how to make a child as successful as possible contributes to the representation in an IEP

Who Sees Them?

Once the document has been planned and produced, it must be distributed. Distribution refers to the way this text moves through the world. This isn't super relevant in the IEP process, because as the director of special education at Deer Valley Unified School district Michael L. Remus confirms, IEPs and the

discussions during meetings are confidential under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and The Family Educational Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) (Wright). These plans can only be accessed by school officials, the parents of the student, teachers, and other specialists who work directly with the student. The school must also keep a hard copy of the plan in the student's cumulative file, as discussed by Remus. It is important to keep these files confidential, because they can often deal with medical diagnoses, and other specifics about a child that the parents and teachers may not want everybody to know about. It is probably most important for the student's current teacher to have access to the IEP, since they are the ones who are using it most often. Teachers are also able to access the past IEPs of a student, to see the progress they have made from one grade to the next, and how they'll need to accommodate the student. IEPs are distributed to the learning team only, because of confidentiality laws.

Classroom Manifestation

After the IEP has been distributed to the teacher, it must be implemented into the classroom. Reception deals with the way a certain genre is implemented. Daniel Everett, a high school math teacher in an integrated class wrote in *The Journal of Whole Schooling* that for him, "Using manipulatives and mnemonics also proved quite successful among all students in [his] inclusive classroom, especially for those with Specific Learning Disabilities." These manipulatives included visuals which a student would move from the "to do" side to the "done" side as they completed a task. Everett created these manipulatives based on the needs of the students laid out in their IEP. This method is incredibly efficient, as the student's goals are meant to be "a natural part of the student's school day," as Remus mentioned. But, things like this do not work for every student. The point of the IEP meetings is to find out which specific changes will help a student the most. Sometimes this is one-on-one math time and sometimes they are physical manipulatives to keep them on track and on task. The changes needed are different for each disability and each student. The specific things teachers do to change the way they teach for a disabled student is their reception of the IEP.

Who Makes IEPs?

Unfortunately, this isn't the juicy gossip between teachers about who has the most difficult student, socialization deals with who produces the genre, which in this case is the schools.

Each student has a learning team who deals with the creation and upkeep of their IEP (see Figure 1). Peter Wright, creator of Wright's Law and author on wrightslaw.com explains that IEP teams consist of a student's: parents, current teacher, special education teacher, member of local agency (who is familiar with

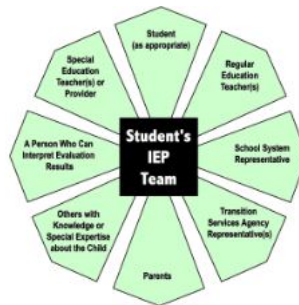


Fig. 1: A student's IEP team.

curriculum), an interpreter (if needed), and the child in some cases (Wright). That seems like a ton of people, but often times the student needs as many advocates as possible. Schools can sometimes be slow in getting students the support they need. Also, it's also common to encounter parents that don't want to believe that their child has a disability, so they do not want any special accommodations for their child - despite it being the best option. This team creates the IEP and discusses the plans that are needed to make sure that the student is successful. IEPs must show that schools are meeting Free and Public Education (FAPE) guidelines, according to Michael L. Remus. By producing these IEPs, the school is able to show that they are providing equal services to students with learning disabilities as they are to students without disabilities.

Laws

The laws regarding IEPs dictate how they are produced. Writing an IEP can sometimes feel like a student has endless metaphorical hoops to jump through. There are many legal rules that come with producing an IEP, because there is a timetable for how long after reported suspicion of learning disability the school has to test the student. The legal boundaries are set by Wright's Law, a law that advocates for students with special needs. Unfortunately, even though there are laws in place, many students go undiagnosed because schools do not want to pay for the expensive and extensive testing for the child to be diagnosed. Educators are discouraged from reporting their suspicions of a learning disability, which means many students slip through the cracks and it can take a long time for them to get the resources they need. Once they are tested and diagnosed, there are laws regarding a family's right to privacy, as mentioned in distribution. According to McLaughlin, the document is also considered "living" and must be updated each time a student reaches a goal that the IEP has outlined (McLaughlin). Each time the IEP needs to be revised, the team must hold a meeting.

Why Are IEPs Needed?

Ecology discusses the background for the text - why is it needed? According to Bachrach, Autism, ADHD, hearing/visual impairment and language delays are among the reasons for an IEP to be requested (Bachrach). It is up to the teachers and other school personnel to refer a student to disability assessment if they suspect a student may have a learning disability. Tests for vision and hearing impairment are fairly simple, as the results are more black and white. These students rarely need full time special education, unless they are accompanied by other intellectual disabilities. Testing for things like Autism Spectrum Disorder, also known as ASD, can be much more difficult. To determine where on the spectrum a child falls, experts must look at their entire development history. The more severe the case, the easier it is to diagnose, but with milder cases, ASD can be a difficult diagnosis to receive. Once these test results are received, they are reviewed by teachers and school personnel to decide what the best plan of action is to ensure student success. In some cases, students are able to remain in regular education classrooms with extra help, but in other cases students are recommended for a full-time special education classroom. If a child is not tested for a learning disability, there would be no need for an IEP. Test results determining a learning disability serve as the “backdrop” for this genre.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I learned that IEPs are a ton of work for a lot of people but, they are able to provide assistance to students who need extra help in their conquest for an education. Learning disabilities tend to be taboo, and people do not tend to discuss them because they are not widely recognized, many students do not get the help they need until much later in their lives. IEPs are a vital part of the education system, and while the individual content should remain confidential, they should be more normalized so that parents and teachers alike can be familiar with them. IEPs benefit students greatly, and improve the quality of education that kids receive.

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