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Seeing Special Needs Education Through the Eyes of Girls Like Us

By: Hailey Leighton

Abstract:

The young adult novel, *Girls Like Us*, by Gail Giles, tells a story of two young ladies—Quincy and Bidy—seeking to live a rich life post-high school. Though fiction, *Girls Like Us* is an insightful curriculum for educators and pre-service teachers about the need for quality education for children with special needs. This capstone traces the history of the development and implementation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP); which at its conception was heralded as a strong tool to provide children with a quality educational program. Unfortunately, the IEP has often become a simple tool which does not, in fact, articulate the real educational needs that youth with special needs require to be successful in and out of a school setting. This capstone concludes with insights for educators, in mainstream or self-contained classrooms, as to what a valuable education for students with special needs includes.

In order to discuss the missteps that happen within the Individualized Education Program (IEP), and how it is they can effect a child's education, we must first go over the historical context of the IEP. In doing so, I will also cover what purpose the IEP holds, and how it was established.

Before the mid 1970s, school districts in most states were allowed to refuse to enroll students that were deemed "uneducable". This classification differed between each school as it was determined by the individual school's administration. Typically, a student with almost any range of disability was considered "uneducable", or was accepted and placed in a regular classroom, but with no additional resources to assist with their needs (Martin, Martin, and Terman, 1996).

Over time, many acts were put into place protecting students' rights to an education; the most notable at the time being the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. This act was "the first major federal effort to subsidize direct services to selected populations in public elementary and secondary schools" (Martin, Martin, and Terman, 1996). Today, ESEA is the primary access of federal support for public schools. After a year of ESEA, Public Law 89-313 was established so that students in schools for the handicapped were counted for entitlement purposes and "special Title 1 funds could be used to benefit this relatively small population of children in state schools" (Martin, Martin, and Terman, 1996).

The equal protection law was then established to prohibit school districts from denying these students, and with the *Mills v. Board of Education* trial in 1972 , it was decided that "children with disabilities have an equal right to public

education offered in a form that was meaningful for them” (Martin, Martin, and Terman, 1996). This meant that the school districts became constitutionally prohibited from deciding that they did not possess adequate resources to help and serve students with disabilities.

After the *Mills v. Board of Education* ruling, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, outlawed discriminatory practices within schools. Next, came the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, which required that all students with disabilities receive a free, appropriate education, while laying out broad mandates for services to all children with disabilities. Within IDEA, in order for schools to receive funds for such children, they must put into place a “ ‘child find’ program in which they can locate all students with disabilities; perform evaluations to determine the effect of the disability on educational performance; conduct annual meetings which produced an individualized education program (IEP) for each student with disabilities; and ensure that the plan was carried out in the least restrictive environment” (Martin, Martin, and Terman, 1996). These IEPs under IDEA were designed to encourage school districts to identify students with disabilities and to provide them with the best available services.

The individualized education programs were designed in order to outline a school’s goals for the child and the services that are needed in order to reach those goals in the least restrictive environment. These goals may, and should include, anything from the child’s academic progress, to their health and social well-being. Along with the staff and teachers of the students, the parents or guardians must also be included in the education of the child.

Although the IEP process is meant to better the education of the students, there have been many changes within the process, and corners that have been cut, in order to make the job a much easier one.

For starters, the IEP has been amended to establish only long-term goals, and rid of short-term goals in order to create less paperwork (Gartin and Murdick, 2005) However, as Goodman and Bond (1993) point out, establishing goals in the beginning of the year and allowing them to be “fixed goals” hinders the education of the student. In establishing for a teacher what it is their student must learn before they have the chance to actually teach the student, they are restricted on what it is they feel is the best way for the student to learn and what they believe they can teach them. However, doing a trial-and-error type of method, calls for more changes to the IEP, thus creating more paperwork and potentially disappointing parents.

However, the main issue within the IEP process that I have come across is the inclusion of parents or guardians. According to Rock (2000), he has labeled the IEP meetings as a “meaningless ritual”, as educators implement and expect parents to approve pre-determined educational programs (Fish, 2008). Parents or guardians are required, by law, to attend the IEP meetings of their child. Although this is almost always done, it is simply as a formality in many cases.

What seems to be the most common issue is that parents have not received the proper education on what knowledge and recommendations they can bring to the meetings. Fish (2008) states, “Many parents feel ill-equipped to address the educational needs of their children as they are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology.” However, the educators and staff that are

present and planning these meaning are actually *required* to ensure that the guardians have the proper resources to prevent such occurrences. According to Martin, Martin, and Terman (1996), in *The Legislative and Litigation History of Special Education* , “At each meeting discussing the child’s IEP, the school district must ensure that the parents of the child are afforded the opportunity to participate, including advance notification, scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreeable time and place, and providing an interpreter if needed.” In doing so, the staff is providing the parents or guardians of the child the ability to decide what it is they think their child needs in terms of their education.

This then brings up the question as to what is deemed a valuable education for students with disabilities. In discussing this, I would like to bring up the novel Girls Like Us.

In the novel, Girls Like Us, by Gail Giles, two girls, Bidy and Quincy, have been given the opportunity by their guidance counselor to live together under the care of an older woman directly after graduation. Upon accepting this chance, each girl has been given a set of responsibilities; one of which, Quincy, also received a job opportunity at a local grocery store. While living there, they learned a great deal about each other and of the world around them. Although each has their strengths, they also have many obstacles to overcome that have somehow managed to slip through the cracks of the educational system they were placed in.

In the story, the two main characters are prime examples of how the IEP process can fail its students. Quincy and Bidy are presented as having a wide range of mental disabilities. Quincy, the more capable of the two, was struck on the head with a brick

when she was young, causing brain damage; where as Bidy was born with her disabilities. Each of the girls had vastly different upbringings; Bidy being raised by her grandmother who did not care about what happened to her, and Quincy, who was passed along through the foster care system.

Throughout the story, we get a glimpse of the vast array of disabilities that each girl holds. We are abruptly informed by Bidy herself that she is incapable of reading or writing, and she has little to no sense as to how to handle money, along with some other “minor” issues. Quincy, however, is able to read and write (although her grammar certainly has its issues, among some other things), but has difficulty assessing social situations. From here, we are able to realize the level of difficulty that this lack of education can present in life outside of a school environment.

As stated earlier, IEPs are used to assess where a student is in their education, and where it is “we”—faculty, educators, and family—want them to be in an allotted amount of time. They can play a very crucial role in determining where said student will be in the future; both in and outside of a school setting. However, they certainly have their pitfalls; such as when a student does not obtain the knowledge on how to do “everyday tasks” and has somehow made it through all of the requirements and through graduation.

In the following pages, I have taken sections of the IEP forms and filled them out based off of how I believe they may have been, in regards to these girls and each of their individual issues. And from here, we are able to realize the level of difficulty that this lack of education can present in life outside of a school environment.

**STATE SELPA IEP TEMPLATE
ANNUAL GOALS**

Student Name Biddy

Date of Birth / /

IEP Date 01 / 02 / 03

Area of Need reading	Measurable Annual Goal # _____ Goal: By annual review, Biddy will be able to read 3rd grade level text; including knowing all phonetic sounds. 80% of the time in 4 out of 5 attempts based on classroom assessments and staff observations.
Baseline Can identify all letters of the alphabet	<input type="checkbox"/> Enables student to be involved/progress in general curriculum/state standard <input type="checkbox"/> Addresses other educational needs resulting from the disability <input type="checkbox"/> Linguistically appropriate <input type="checkbox"/> Transition Goal: <input type="checkbox"/> Education/Training <input type="checkbox"/> Employment <input type="checkbox"/> Independent Living Person(s) Responsible _____

Progress Report 1 Date 04 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress can identify most letters of the alphabet

Comments _____

Progress Report 2 Date 07 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress can identify all letters of the alphabet

Comments _____

Progress Report 3 Date 10 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress understands some of the phonetic sounds of the alphabet

Comments _____

Annual Review Date 01 / 02 / 04

Goal Met Yes No

Comments Biddy shows progress, but shows no interest in reading

As I have demonstrated, Biddy's issue on her ability to read or write was not properly addressed. Instead, it is my assumption that they were not even addressed at all. This not only brings up a question of the IEP, but begins to question the standards of the teachers and of the school itself. Besides in special cases (ie. a child with more severe disabilities), there should be absolutely zero instances where a child has somehow been able to make it through twelve to sixteen year of education (up to sixteen being inclusive of continuation school students that are given until the age of 22) without having the ability to read and write, or even have basic math skills. This brings up questions against the whole notion of an IEP and the role it plays in a student's education.

In my opinion, a lot of this also had to do with the fact that Biddy had an extremely unsupportive guardian. When she was born, he mother left, refusing to take care of a child with disabilities, and left her in the care of her grandmother. In the first chapter, she states "Granny called me Retard" (Giles, 2014). What this shows is Biddy's grandma's strong dislike for Biddy and for children like her. She goes on to say "Granny didn't come. She said my paper ain't nothin' but a joke. She says that I didn't have no real classes. It ain't a real diploma" (Giles, 2014) when unknowingly describing how unsupportive her grandmother is towards her and her success. However, seeing as to how Biddy lacks some very important life skills, as I have pointed out, there is in a way, some truth to this. From her point of view, she must see that if someone can graduate without being able to read and write, or any other basic skill, than the diploma must have been given to simply "pass" her and to get her out of school.

In knowing that parents/guardians *can* play a huge role in IEP meetings and decisions in regards to their child, one can only assume that her grandmother played little

to no role in this process. In contrast, this may have been of no fault of her own. There could be many factors that play in to an occurrence such as this. For example, it could be that no one bothered to educate her, or give her information, and what was the reasoning behind her granddaughter's disabilities and how they affect her learning and day-to-day life. Furthermore, those involved in her education may have made no effort to involve Biddy's grandmother in her education, or help her figure out what it is she needs to know to actually be involved in the process. But going on this, it is all the more reason for educators to ensure that she was learning all that she needs to know to be a functional being in society.

It is also evident throughout the book that although Biddy is able to grasp a sense of what is going on in social situations, she is still very unaware of what is acceptable or not. I think that in knowing she is mentally handicapped, Biddy believes she deserves to be treated as less than. This is made extremely clear when she discusses her home while growing up with her grandmother. She describes this time growing up while saying, "The furniture isn't broke down and the walls are clean. No peeling wallpaper or brown water stains nowhere... I never had me a bedroom before. Granny stored stacks of old newspaper and magazines and all her mail in the extra bedroom in her house. I slept on a pallet in the living room" (Giles, 2014). Upon receiving such a "gift", such as a furnished room, Biddy begins to realize how she was actually treated while growing up with her grandmother. This situation also gave Quincy a huge insight in Biddy's life and shows parts of who she is and why. At this point, the girls start to really connect even more without realizing it, and begin to figure out more about each other.

**STATE SELPA IEP TEMPLATE
ANNUAL GOALS**

Student Name Quincy

Date of Birth / /

IEP Date 01/02/2003

Area of Need behavior	Measurable Annual Goal # _____ Goal: <p align="center">Will act appropriately in a variety of situations</p>
Baseline acts inappropriate ly in social situations	<input type="checkbox"/> Enables student to be involved/progress in general curriculum/state standard <input type="checkbox"/> Addresses other educational needs resulting from the disability <input type="checkbox"/> Linguistically appropriate <input type="checkbox"/> Transition Goal: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Education/Training <input type="checkbox"/> Employment <input type="checkbox"/> Independent Living Person(s) Responsible _____

Progress Report 1 Date 04/02/2003

Summary of Progress gets frustrated in unfamiliar surroundings. Does not like physical contact.

Comments _____

Progress Report 2 Date 07/02/2003

Summary of Progress working on manners

Comments _____

Progress Report 3 Date 10/02/2003

Summary of Progress knows how to greet someone appropriately, but does not maintain a conversation

Comments _____

Annual Review Date 01/02/2004

Goal Met Yes No

Comments can maintain 2-3 exchange conversation with prompting

In regards to Quincy, she is very socially challenged. Bramlett and Smith (1994) describes functional social skills to “consist of behaviors that enable a person to interact effectively with others and to avoid socially unacceptable behavior”. In the

story, she states “She [Ms. D] try to give me a hug and a kiss. Shoot-a-geese! I pull away fast-like...Ain’t any use in that. Get move too often” (Giles, 2014). This is showing that Quincy has almost no desire to become attached to anyone because she feels as though within what seems like an instant, she will be left and sent to a new house. Throughout the book, instances such as this also show how Quincy also struggles with the concept of empathy. It is also evident that she does not feel as though she actually has a place in which she belongs; “I had tole her a little bit of a lie. When you as light skin as me and usually live with at least one white person, blacks don’t want no part of you either. And when you ‘challenged’ and ugly, it pretty much makes no never mind what else you are. You ain’t much of nothing” (Giles, 2014). In my opinion, this greatly correlates with her social identity and how she sees herself. Through her past of foster families, and the ways in which her different cultures treat her, Quincy has not been taught anything other than that she does not belong anywhere or with anyone. One quote that really illustrates her thoughts was said while a coworker wishes to get to know her a little more; Quincy states “I shrug. Ain’t nobody done this before. In school all anybody need to know is you in Special Ed.”.

It is also evident that no one has educated her on what is appropriate and what is not, in regard to the ways in which people treat her and how they act towards her. Throughout the story, Quincy is being harassed by an old coworker that was eventually fired when he threatened and assaulted her. Upon being questioned about what had happened and what he did to her, she is asked if he “touched her” to which she responds “Course he touch me. I tole you he grab holt of my arm” (Giles, 2014). In this statement, it is evident that she had no idea what was being implied when asked if she was

“touched”. This goes to show how throughout her years of schooling, Quincy was failed. Although, to most of us, it may seem as though these types of questions have very obvious answers, she was never informed and taught as to what is an acceptable way to be treated by another person, and what is unacceptable and should be reported. This knowledge is a “skill” that is subtly picked up on as we grow. But, to a student with disabilities, its subtleness can be easily and completely skipped over; thus causing the child to “miss out” on catching on to these types of situations, their inappropriateness, and how to assess them. This may also portray the thought that she has of all of her foster families. Not only is it the responsibility of the school staff to ensure the education of their students in all forms, but it is also the responsibility of the guardians. Just as with Biddy, her caretakers did not take the time to be sure that their foster child was receiving an education that not only ensured their “smarts”, but also their well-being and safety.

The goal of an IEP is to serve the student as a *whole*. As is evident though the examples in Girls Like Us, this is not always the case. What sometimes occurs is that these “basic” skills are skimmed over and are left untaught. In some cases, they are either ignored, or the educator assumed that the child, who has some sort of *learning disability* will pick up on this “skill” on their own. Instead, the IEPs created need to be designed with this knowledge in mind, and focus not only on a child with disabilities’ academic skills, but also on their skills outside of a school setting.

From what I have stated previously, there are many changes that should have been made to both of the girls’ IEPs. Here I have made some mock IEPs based off of what I think “should have been” in regards to what might be best for their education.

**STATE SELPA IEP TEMPLATE
ANNUAL GOALS**

Student Name Biddy

Date of Birth ___/___/___

IEP Date 01/02/03

<p>Area of Need</p> <p>reading</p>	<p>Measurable Annual Goal # _____</p> <p>Goal: By annual review, Biddy will be able to read 3rd grade level text; including knowing all phonetic sounds. 80% of the time in 4 out of 5 attempts based on classroom assessments and staff observations</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Enables student to be involved/progress in general curriculum/state standard</p>
<p>Baseline</p> <p>Biddy can currently identify all letters of the alphabet</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Addresses other educational needs resulting from the disability</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Linguistically appropriate</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Transition Goal: <input type="checkbox"/> Education/Training <input type="checkbox"/> Employment <input type="checkbox"/> Independent Living</p> <p>Person(s) Responsible _____</p>

Progress Report 1 Date 04 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress can identify all vowels and 50% of consonants and their sounds

Comments _____

Progress Report 2 Date 07 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress can identify all phonetic sounds and can read single-syllable words

Comments _____

Progress Report 3 Date 10 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress can read simple 3-5 word sentences

Comments _____

Annual Review Date 01 / 02 / 04

Goal Met Yes No

Comments currently reading at a 1st grade level. Can read strings of simple sentences. Has difficulty determining meaning.

**STATE SELPA IEP TEMPLATE
ANNUAL GOALS**

Student Name Quincy

Date of Birth / /

IEP Date 01/02/03

Area of Need behavior/ social/ emotional Baseline has difficulty interpreting social cues or facial expressions. she can greet, and speak when spoken to	Measurable Annual Goal # _____ Goal: To be able to interpret appropriate responses in social situations. To learn facial expressions, including: happy, sad, and angry. And to give appropriate reactions, 80% of the time in 4 out of 5 situations based on staff and family observations. <input type="checkbox"/> Enables student to be involved/progress in general curriculum/state standard <input type="checkbox"/> Addresses other educational needs resulting from the disability <input type="checkbox"/> Linguistically appropriate <input type="checkbox"/> Transition Goal: <input type="checkbox"/> Education/Training <input type="checkbox"/> Employment <input type="checkbox"/> Independent Living Person(s) Responsible _____
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Progress Report 1 Date 04 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress currently using picture map to identify emotions.

Comments can identify happy and sad

Progress Report 2 Date 07 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress can identify all facial expressions on a picture map. Is learning to respond appropriately to questions in a social setting

Comments _____

Progress Report 3 Date 10 / 02 / 03

Summary of Progress can maintain a conversation with prompts. can ask one follow-up question after a greeting.

Comments struggling with physical contact in social situations

Annual Review Date 01 / 02 / 04

Goal Met Yes No

Comments can greet someone and have 2-3 follow-up questions. can appropriately respond to facial expressions (happy, sad, angry). can maintain a conversation in a social situations with prompts. Has difficulty when physical contact is involved.

Through all that has been discussed in what could have been the girls' IEP process, and what it should have been, this brings up a very important question: What is a valuable education for a student with mild to moderate disabilities? In this next section I will discuss what is felt to be a valuable education from the perspective of a parent, and also from the perspective of a teacher; and how it is that the IEP process can transform the two together to make a whole and successful child.

From the teacher's point of view (my own) I find it obvious that teaching a child to read, write, and do basic math are necessities; not matter what it takes. Unless it is a special case, such as a child with more severe disabilities, there should be zero instances where a child graduates school without the ability to have such basic life necessities.

However, after speaking with a few parents, that was not always the case. Of course they would love for their children to be able to read and write, and be able to count, but not all of them found these to be absolutely necessary. Instead, most of the parents thought that other "basic" life skills were deemed most important for their children. For example, most agreed that it was crucial for their child to be able to cook simple meals for themselves, learn proper hygiene, and how do to things such as laundry.

From all of the articles, and from Girls Like Us, I have come to the conclusion that what both I, as a teacher, and what the parents I have spoken to, believe is a valuable education must be infused. Using the IEP process, it is our job as educators to ensure that

the child with disabilities is not only learning “basic” academic skills, but that they are also learning “basic” life skills. It is *our* job to ensure that their parents/guardians wants are heard, because in the end, *they* are the ones who should determine what is best for *their* child. In the end, they are the ones who know their child best, and are the ones who depend on us to make sure their child can essentially survive if even on their own.

Resources

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