

An Observational Analysis of the IEP Conference

SUE GOLDSTEIN
BONNIE STRICKLAND
ANN P. TURNBULL
LYNN CURRY

Abstract: Through naturalistic observational procedures, this study examined the dynamics of individualized education program (IEP) conferences. Participants present, the nature and frequency of topics discussed, and the length of conferences were considered. A followup questionnaire was administered to all conference participants to measure satisfaction. Results indicated that the IEP conferences studied generally involved the resource teacher, who was found to be the most dominant speaker, reviewing an already developed IEP with the parents, who were the primary recipients of the comments made at the conference. Implications point to the need to train parents in procedures and responsibilities associated with the IEP process and to train professionals to involve parents as active decision makers in defining an appropriate education for their child.

SUE GOLDSTEIN is Doctoral Student; BONNIE STRICKLAND is Instructor; and ANN P. TURNBULL is Associate Professor, Division of Special Education, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. LYNN CURRY is Assistant Director of Research, Division of Continuing Medical Education, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

■ In the last decade professionals in special education have noted the need to involve parents in educational planning for their children as teachers, advisors, and advocates (Simches, 1975). Studies have indicated that parents' participation in education has a positive effect on their child's achievement (Bigler, 1975; Bittle, 1975; Edgerly, 1975; Locke, 1976; McKinney, 1975). Parent involvement has also brought about positive change in parental attitudes (Corrado, 1975; Lynch, 1976).

With the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, a parent participation component of special education has been mandated for the public schools. Parents are now to be involved in all aspects of their child's placement process. This includes the presence of the parent at the individualized education program (IEP) conference. Communication has been emphasized as a major need by both parents and professionals in forming an effective alliance. The IEP conference can be viewed as an excellent means of exchanging information and as a mutual planning session between school and home. In this conference the professional can define his or her role as one of consultant to the parent, helping to set realistic goals for the child.

The role of parents in IEP development and on school planning teams has just begun to evolve. In a survey of professional members of school planning teams, a majority felt that parent participation in IEP development should consist mainly of presenting and gathering information relevant to the case, rather than contributing to the educational planning (Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978). Although many parents and professionals have advocated the role of parents of exceptional

children as working partners in special education, the parent-professional alliance is still in an early stage of development.

The purpose of this study was to observe IEP conferences involving parents of mainstreamed children with mild learning problems. The observations were to delineate the frequency of parental involvement in the conference and the nature of topics discussed by parents and educators. A questionnaire was also developed to ascertain each participant's satisfaction with the conference. The study provides a descriptive analysis of parent-professional interaction that is actually occurring in the development of the IEP.

METHOD

Sample

This study focused on the IEP conference process in three school districts in North Carolina: one rural, one suburban, and one in a university setting. Two schools within each district were chosen by the authors and local education agency directors of special education as being representative of that district. Conferences to be observed were selected by the special education teachers in the designated schools.

Two factors contributed to limiting the sample size of the study to 14 conferences. First, due to the exigencies of securing prior clearances, the study could not be implemented until early October of the school year. By that time the legislative deadline (*Federal Register*, August 23, 1977, Sec. 121a.342) had passed for developing IEP's for children previously classified as handicapped. Thus, the potential pool of handicapped children still in need of an IEP was limited. Secondly, although 21 conferences were scheduled to be observed, 7 of them were canceled because the parents failed to attend. These conferences were either rescheduled or a copy of the IEP was sent to the parents' home for approval. Of the 14 remaining conferences, 11 involved children who were being considered for special education placement for the first time. The children whose conferences were observed were in grades two through six, and were classified as either mildly mentally retarded or learning disabled. These categorical areas represented the majority of handicapped children mainstreamed in the schools involved.

Procedures

As each IEP conference was scheduled, the special services teacher in the school contacted the observers. A coder-observer was in attendance at each conference reported in this study. An intercoder reliability of .87 was established by using videotaped conference segments for training and testing prior to initiating the observations. Written permission to code the verbal interaction in the conference was obtained from each parent before the session began.

A coding instrument was developed which enabled the observers to specify at 2 minute intervals the topic being discussed, the speaker, and the recipient. For example, through the use of numerical identifiers, it might be coded that the resource teacher was talking to the parent about a behavioral concern. Topics coded were selected through an analysis of the requirements of Public Law 94-142, as well as in consideration of the educational procedures that would produce these desired ends. The 2 minute time interval allowed the documentation of anecdotal information while still enabling accurate identification of major conference topics. Additional information coded included all participants by role at the conference and the starting and ending times of the conference.

A followup questionnaire to measure conference satisfaction was completed by all participants immediately after each conference. The questionnaire was comprised of eight questions rated on a five point scale with terminal points identified as *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree*.

RESULTS

Participants

In the 14 conferences observed, the mean number of participants was 3.7 (range 2-6). Table 1 indicates the percentage of observed conferences attended by the role of the participants.

When examining the IEP conference participants in light of the specifications for committee membership set forth in the Rules and Regulations (*Federal Register*, August 23, 1977, Sec. 121a.344) for implementing Public Law 94-142, only 5 of the 14 conferences were found to be legally constituted. In the 9 conferences that did not have full representation, the missing participant was the representative

TABLE 1

**Percentage of Observed Conferences Attended by
Role of the Participant**

Role	Percent of conferences attended
Resource teacher	100
Parent	100
Classroom teacher	43
Student interns (student teacher or psychology intern)	36
Evaluator (other than resource teacher)	29
Principal	21
Counselor	14
Speech therapist	14
Reading teacher	7
Handicapped student	0

of the public agency, other than the child's teacher, who was responsible for providing or supervising special education.

None of the observed conferences were attended by both of the child's parents. Of the 14 conferences, the child's mother was in attendance at 11 and the father at 3. The child

was not included in any of the conferences observed.

Length of Conferences

The mean length of the 14 conferences was 36 minutes, the range being 6 to 72 minutes. No correlation was found to exist between conference length and the number of people present or the grade level of the child.

Topics

Table 2 provides a ranking of the topics discussed at the conferences according to the percentage of the total number of citations coded and the mean number of coded citations per conference. Although curriculum was the most frequently discussed topic, more than half of the coded curriculum statements were made in two conferences. Excluding these two conferences, the mean curriculum citations for the remaining 12 conferences was 1.9.

No one topic was recorded as being discussed at every conference. Curriculum, however, was cited in 13, and evaluation in 12 of the 14 conferences.

Conference Communication

The communication in the conference was coded according to which participant was speaking and which was the recipient of the

TABLE 2

Topics Ranked by Percentage of Total Citations

Topics	Percent of total citations	Mean citations per conference
Curriculum (goals and objectives)	20	3.6
Behavior	14	2.5
Performance	13	2.4
Miscellaneous conference procedures (signing papers, explaining forms)	12	2.2
Evaluation	11	2.0
Personal/family	7	1.3
Instructional materials	5	.9
Placement	4	.7
Special services	4	.7
Rights and responsibilities	3	.6
Individual responsible	2	.4
Health	1	.2
Future contacts	1	.1
Future plans	—	—

information. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the participants ranked by the mean coded speaking citations per conference attended. The resource teacher was observed talking more than twice as much as the parent. Three of the 14 parents accounted for 63% of the parental speaking citations, all of which occurred in the three longest conferences. In examining the data from the four shortest conferences (6-20 minutes), the parents were recorded as talking 0 to 2 times. The resource teacher talked most at 11 of the conferences, while parents (both fathers) were cited as speaking the most at two conferences. At one conference the parent and classroom teacher were cited as speaking an equal amount, both more than the resource teacher.

TABLE 3

Mean Coded Speaking Citations of Participants

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Mean speaking citations per conference attended</i>
Resource teacher	9.6
Parent	4.6
Classroom teacher	3.5
Counselor	3.0
Principal	2.6
Evaluator	2.0
Speech therapist	1.0
Reading teacher	1.0

The primary recipients of statements made during the conference were parents (63% of statements), resource teachers (17% of statements), and classroom teachers (10% of statements). Discussion at the IEP conference was directed toward the parent. The resource teachers were cited as directing 81% of their statements to parents, while the classroom teachers were talking to the parents during 76% of their cited statements. Typically, the professional who was speaking in the meeting directed comments to the parent, to the exclusion of other professionals who were present.

The topics most frequently discussed by the three major participant groups and the percentage of each group's total speaking citations devoted to that topic are outlined in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Topics Most Frequently Discussed by Three Major Participant Groups

<i>Participant groups</i>	<i>Percent of group's total speaking citations devoted to topic</i>
Resource teachers	
Curriculum	22
Evaluation	19
Performance	13
Parents	
Behavior	18
Curriculum	18
Personal/family	15
Classroom teachers	
Behavior	47
Curriculum	24
Performance	14

Conference Satisfaction

Table 5 includes the mean responses for each participant group for the eight items on the questionnaire completed at the conclusion of the conference. No significant differences among groups were found in their report of satisfaction with the IEP conference proceedings.

DISCUSSION

Parent Participation

The two consistent participants at all observed IEP conferences were the resource teacher and the parent. In seven instances of previously scheduled conferences, the parents failed to attend. The conference was rescheduled in these instances, or the IEP was sent home for the parent to sign. (It should be pointed out that merely sending the IEP home for the parental signature does not meet the legal requirements for implementing Public Law 94-142.) The major reason that the educational personnel chose not to proceed with the conference was that in all seven instances of canceled conferences, the IEP had been written primarily by the resource teacher prior to the conference. Thus, the purpose of the conference could be viewed as informing parents of the nature of the already developed IEP, ob-

TABLE 5

Mean Responses for Each Participant Group on Followup Questionnaire (Scaled from 1 to 5)

	Resource teachers	Parents	Classroom teachers	Principals	Others (counselors, evaluators, student interns)
1. Has the IEP committee meeting been helpful in planning the child's educational program?	4.5	4.9	4.0	5.0	4.1
2. Can the goals set for the child be accomplished during the current school year?	4.1	4.4	3.5	4.5	3.9
3. Did you have all your questions concerning the child answered at the committee meeting?	4.1	4.8	4.7	4.5	4.0
4. Are you satisfied with the placement decision?	4.8	5.0	4.5	4.5	4.7
5. Can the school system offer the resources to effectively implement the IEP?	4.6	4.7	4.5	5.0	4.6
6. As a result of the IEP meeting, do you have a better understanding of the child?	4.4	4.3	4.0	4.5	4.2
7. Do you have a definite responsibility in achieving the goals of the IEP?	4.6	4.1	5.0	4.0	2.9
8. Do you feel that your time at the meeting was well spent?	4.9	4.7	4.7	4.0	4.6
Mean	4.5	4.6	4.3	4.5	4.2

taining any suggestions from them for modification, and receiving their approval. If the parent was not in attendance, the purpose of the conference from the viewpoint of the educators could not be fulfilled.

The National Education Association's (NEA) *Study of Education of the Handicapped* (1978) reported that a common procedure for making placement decisions is for the resource teacher to confer informally with a classroom teacher concerning a child's placement. The IEP meeting then becomes little more than a "performance procedure" (p. 36). Of the 14 conferences observed, in only one instance was the meeting actually devoted to specifying goals and objectives jointly between the parent and educators. It is noteworthy that in this instance the father was a psychologist who was familiar with the purpose and nature of the IEP, and

had previously indicated to the resource teacher that his wife would attend the meeting and participate in writing the goals and objectives.

Scheduling

As reported in the previous section, none of the conferences were attended by both parents. Scheduling might have been an obstacle for some parents. Two of the conferences were held at 7:30 a.m. and the remaining 12 were conducted from 2:00 to 4:30 p.m. Evening meetings might have enabled more fathers to attend. The parents of learning disabled children in a survey conducted by Dembinski and Mauser (1977) stated a strong preference for the inclusion of both parents at conferences in which the concerns about the child are discussed. Local education agencies might provide encouragement for both parents to attend

and explore alternative scheduling to increase the possibility of arranging a convenient time for parents.

Other Participants

The finding that the classroom teacher was present at fewer than half of the conferences is disturbing. It indicates that the person most responsible for implementing educational strategies to reach the objectives set for a mainstreamed child is not routinely involved in the development of these objectives.

The lack of correlation between the length of the IEP conference and the number of conference participants might be reflective of the findings related to major participant groups. It appears from these findings that the majority of the conferences consisted of the resource teacher reviewing the developed IEP with the parent, regardless of the number of other participants at the meeting. Other participants in the meeting might have participated only incidentally, and thus they would not have affected the length of the conference.

Topics Discussed

In analyzing the topics most discussed at the conferences, it was not surprising to find that curriculum, behavior, and performance ranked as the three most frequently discussed areas. It was surprising, however, that topics such as evaluation, placement, special services, rights and responsibilities, future contacts, and future plans received so little attention. An analysis of the anecdotal information related to evaluation revealed that standardized achievement test scores were typically reported to parents in terms of grade equivalencies. The explanations pertaining to evaluation could generally be characterized as confusing, and yet parents were not cited as asking questions for clarification. One contributing factor to this lack of questions could be the fact that evaluation was discussed at the beginning of the conference, whereas parents were coded as participating more actively in discussions during the later portion of the conference when they apparently felt more relaxed.

Placement and special services each received an average of .7 citations per conference. Since this represents a major decision in the provision of an appropriate education to handicapped students, it is puzzling that such minimal attention was directed to it. Typi-

cally, parents were told that the child would be receiving resource help. This is consistent with the NEA findings previously reported. Parents generally seemed pleased that the child would be receiving extra help, but in one instance the parent questioned exactly how the resource program would be structured. On the followup questionnaire, parents reported total satisfaction (mean score of 5.0 on a 5 point scale) with the placement decision.

It is doubtful that the parents were aware of the day to day functioning of resource rooms or of issues such as the nature of coordination between resource and classroom teachers. The reason that parents did not ask placement questions could be that they did not realize the complexity of all of the issues involved in insuring that the child is, indeed, appropriately served. Further, parents made no requests for related services such as speech therapy or counseling even though these services would have been highly appropriate in several cases.

The legal rights and responsibilities of parents were glossed over in the majority of conferences. One observer noted that the resource teachers sometimes mentioned to the parent that they had discussed the parent's rights previously, and asked the parent whether he or she had any questions. This mention of rights was not always cited in the 2 minute observations. Two of the school systems gave parents a printed copy of their rights for future reference. Only one parent was noted as asking a question pertaining to rights, which was on the subject of confidentiality of records. Considering these observations, it could be inferred that either parents were already well aware of their rights or, more probably, that they remained relatively uninformed on this subject.

The lack of discussion of future contacts is troublesome. No comments were made regarding the legal requirement to review the IEP on an annual basis or to plan strategies for keeping lines of communication open between school and home.

The proceedings of the IEP conferences observed in this study can generally be characterized as the resource teacher taking the initiative to review the already developed IEP with the parent, who was the primary recipient of the comments made at the conference. Parents were given the opportunity to contribute additional information on the child that might result in modifying the IEP. This role is con-

sistent with the findings of Yoshida and his colleagues (1978) regarding the responses of planning team members, who viewed the appropriate parental involvement activities as giving and receiving information. Further, the role was characterized in the Yoshida and Gottlieb (1977) model of parental participation as "passive participant" (p. 19). The majority of parental statements focused on the behavior of the child at home and at school. The anecdotal notes of observers indicated that the majority of the parents expressed the desire to work with their children at home; however, on the whole they received few suggestions from teachers on exactly what they should be working on.

The high frequency of classroom teachers' statements pertaining to behavior is an important indicator of their concerns regarding mainstreaming. Classroom teachers were cited as making statements concerning behavior almost twice as frequently as statements concerning curriculum. The IEP conference should be viewed as an opportunity to insure that the classroom teacher has sufficient information and backup support to manage the behavior of the child in the classroom.

Considering that the average length of the conferences was 36 minutes, it is not surprising that many important topics were not fully discussed. Additionally, several of the conferences were scheduled back-to-back; therefore, a time limit was imposed from the outset. Certainly, the time available for IEP meetings is at a premium. However, it is clear that an IEP meeting that covers all necessary topics related to providing an appropriate education to a handicapped child and creates opportunities for two-way communication between parents and educators cannot be limited to a half hour.

Satisfaction with Conference

The overwhelmingly positive reaction to the conferences on the part of all participants was an unanticipated finding. In one instance, for example, a mother walked 1½ miles to school in below freezing weather to attend her child's conference, which lasted only 6 minutes. On the followup questionnaire the mother circled "5's" on all 8 items, indicating a highly favorable reaction to the conference.

The response of parents to the item on the questionnaire asking whether they had all their questions answered was extremely posi-

tive (4.8). Considering how many topics received minimal attention and how short in duration the conferences were, this seems to be an inflated score. It is difficult to explain this reaction. It could be due to the parents' lack of knowledge of the purpose of the IEP meeting. They might have viewed the conference as an increase in communication over what had been experienced with teachers in the past, and felt a sense of relief that the purpose of the conference had not been to report that the child was "in trouble." They might also have anticipated positively the extra help the child would be receiving.

IMPLICATIONS

Due to the limited size, nature, and demographic restrictions of the sample, caution must be exercised in generalizing the conclusions and implications of this study. Further research and replication would more clearly delineate the extent and nature of parental involvement in the IEP conference. With these precautions in mind, several implications of this study will be considered here.

Availability of IEP to the Classroom Teacher

The limited involvement of classroom teachers in the IEP conference, the presence of the resource teacher at all conferences, and the frequency of speaking citations attributed to this representative, imply that the resource teacher assumes primary responsibility not only for the IEP conference, but also for the development and implementation of the IEP. For example, classroom teachers attended only 43% of the conferences. This raises a question as to whether or not the IEP is available to and being used by the classroom teacher. One resource teacher commented to an observer that not one of eight teachers whom she asked about an IEP knew what an IEP was, although they had children with IEP's in their classrooms for the entire year.

Further research is needed to determine whether this observation is a trend in all school districts and whether responsibility delegated in this way results in the IEP being simply a function of special education—developed by special educators and reflecting curriculum objectives of special education programs—rather than of the child's total curriculum. Further research might also determine the extent to which regular classroom

teachers with mainstreamed handicapped students have access to and make use of the IEP in the regular instructional setting.

Definition of Roles and Responsibilities

The limited attendance and passive participation of other members of the IEP committee suggest that roles and responsibilities of these members are not clearly defined. A local education agency (LEA) representative, other than the child's teacher, was present at only 36% of the conferences, and each held a passive role in the conference attended. The role of this participant needs to be specified and, perhaps, training provided to help the LEA representative act as a parent advocate at the conference. Evaluation of a parent advocate role is needed to measure its effect on increasing parent participation in a conference. Unless each participant understands what his or her contribution is to be and actively assumes that role, the multidimensional purpose of the IEP conference will be defeated.

Parental Involvement in IEP

While parental participation and opportunity for such participation was quite limited in this study, further research is needed to explore the question of what constitutes effective parental involvement in IEP development and implementation. It should be pointed out that many parents may prefer not to be involved actively in writing goals and objectives. They may prefer the role of reviewing a previously developed IEP with the opportunity to make additions or deletions. The individual preferences of parents should be recognized. It should not be assumed that the most active involvement of parents in IEP development is always the goal for which to strive; or, on the other hand, that the mere presence of the parent at the IEP conference constitutes involvement. A caution in this regard is that some parents might wish to participate in the writing of goals and objectives but might lack the prerequisite skills for such involvement.

Replication of surveys to obtain data on parental satisfaction is needed prior to drawing definite conclusions in this area. The reaction of educators to the conference proceedings also requires further investigation. In a followup study currently under way, resource teachers have indicated that the major positive outcomes of IEP development are ease in planning

for the handicapped child on a daily and weekly basis after the IEP is completed, and increased collaboration between special and regular educators. Increased collaboration between parents and educators was not identified by resource teachers in the study in process as a major positive outcome. It will be important in the continued development of the IEP process to build on the positive reactions of the initial implementation and refine it according to increased knowledge of this planning process.

CONCLUSION

The implications of this study point to the need for systematically training parents to fulfill their roles and responsibilities associated with IEP involvement and for training professionals to involve parents as *full* partners in this significant educational task. The competencies associated with successful shared decision making on the part of parents and professionals need to be specified and training models generated. This need was underscored by the NEA study (1978). It was pointed out in this study that, although the parent's involvement in the IEP is crucial and the need for systematic and humane parent education programs has been demonstrated, no evidence was found that such programs existed at the time of the study. Based on the results of this investigation, we have proposed training alternatives aimed at preparing both professionals and parents to share in educational decision making at the IEP conference (Turnbull, Strickland, & Goldstein, 1978). Evaluation of training programs should also be initiated. The ultimate outcome of the training for both parents and professionals should be a cooperative effort in developing the most appropriate educational program for the child.

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