Why Is This Cake on Fire?

Inviting Students Into the IEP Process

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The Birthday Party

Imagine being a small child and hearing your parents talk about your birthday party. You hear the excitement in their voices as they talk and plan, starting with a theme for the party, deciding whom they will invite, and then figuring out who will do each job. As the time draws closer, you hear more and more conversations about your birthday party, and so you know it is coming soon. And then your birthday comes and goes, but no one ever invites you to your party. *Maybe they just forgot to invite me, you think.*

The Next Year . . .

The next year, you again hear your parents discuss your birthday party. Once again, you hear the excitement in their voices as they talk and plan, choose a new theme for the party, decide whom they will invite, and then finally, appoint someone to be in charge of each job. Again, as time draws closer, you hear more and more conversations about your birthday party and so you know it is coming soon. And again your birthday comes and goes, but no one ever invites you to your party. *It must not be important for me to be there, you think.*

The Following Year . . .

The following year, you once again hear your parents talk about your birthday party. You barely notice the excited tone in their voices as they decide on another new theme, make the invitation list, and divide the jobs. As the time draws closer, you barely listen to the increased conversations about your party. Again your birthday comes and goes, but no one ever invites you. *Now you think that birthday parties are not important at all.*

Several Years Later . . .

Several years later, when you become a teenager, you barely catch a snippet of a conversation about your birthday party. But since you have never been invited to your parties, you know that your presence there is not important. You believe that birthday parties are not important at all, so you do not pay any attention to the birthday plans.

But this time, you receive an invitation to your party! You are surprised, confused, and even scared. You ask your parents why you received an invitation this year. They say,

> Well, you are a teenager now, and you are old enough to help with everything that a birthday party involves. Each year, we start with a theme for your party and decide the best ways to represent that theme. Then we make the invitation list and decide who will do the different jobs. Now that you are a teenager, we thought that you would like to become involved!

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But you respond by saying,

> Why would I want to become involved now? If these birthday parties were supposed to be *my* birthday parties, why wasn't *I* invited all along? Why didn't I have a chance to select themes that interest me? Why didn't I get to help decide whom to invite? And why didn't I get to help choose who would do the different jobs?

"We thought that you were not old enough to help."

"Now I am so old that I do not know *how* to help with any of it; you have been doing it for me for all these years. Just keep on doing it without me."

Now . . .

Imagine this scenario again, only this time, insert individualized education program (IEP) meetings in place of birthday parties.

The IEP Meeting

Students with disabilities hear their teachers and parents talk about their IEP meetings, they hear about goals, and they hear about what they are doing wrong and the problems that they are having. They hear about plans and services and who will work on each job. They hear about who will attend the IEP meeting. But students rarely receive invitations to attend when they first begin to hear about these meetings. At first, students may believe that someone just forgot to invite them. In the years that follow, when they still do not receive invitations, students may think that attending their own IEP meetings is not important since no one shares any information about the meeting. They may decide that an IEP meeting is an opportunity for adults to talk negatively about all the problems that students are having in school and divide up the necessary jobs.

The First Invitation

By the time that students become teenagers, they may have decided that IEP meetings are not important at all since no one has invited them or included them in the planning phase. In fact, some students may be ashamed for anyone to know that they have an IEP. When students reach middle school or high school and finally receive their first invitation to attend an IEP meeting, they may not be interested at all—and they make statements similar to those in the birthday party example: "Now I am so old that I do not know *how* to help with any of it; you have been doing it for me for all these years. Just keep on doing it without me."

Questions We Should Ask

As educators, parents, and service providers, we should be asking the following questions:

- Do we encourage students to become involved in their IEP meetings?
- Does this involvement begin at an early age?
- Do we encourage students to become involved in designing the "themes" of their IEPs?
- Do we allow students to help decide whom to invite to their IEP meetings?
- Do we give students opportunities to be responsible for the goals in their IEPs?
- Do students know that the IEP meetings are for them and that the intent of the IEP process is to design a plan—a blueprint—that will help them be successful in school and in life?

Do students know that the intent of the IEP process is to design a plan—a blueprint—that will help them be successful in school and in life?

Behaviors We Should Expect

The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) recognized students as important members of the IEP team (Martin, Huber Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Storms, O'Leary, & Williams, 2000; Test et al., 2004). The 2004 IDEA amendments continue to emphasize the importance of transition planning and require that the IEP team develop measurable postsecondary goals in the IEP on the basis of the student's assessed needs, strengths, preferences, and interests (Council for Exceptional Children, 2004). The implication is that educators need to invite students not only to be a part of the IEP meeting but also to be a part of the IEP process, so that they can learn about and communicate their needs, preferences, and interests. Students should be involved with the IEP planning process and should

- Have an informative role in developing and writing their educational performance description (the Present Levels of Educational Performance, or PLEP).
- Aid in developing measurable postsecondary goals in their IEPs.
- Help identify the accommodations, modifications, and supports that they need.
- Be responsible in the achievement of coordinated transition activities, postschool linkages, and postsecondary goals (Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, 2004; Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, & Stillerman, 2002).

Are We Inviting Students to Speak or Just to Attend?

Expecting students to exercise active roles in the IEP process means doing much more than just inviting them to attend the meetings. We must encourage them to participate actively in the IEP conversations. In Year 1 of a 3-year research study conducted by Martin, et al. (2006), researchers observed 109 middle and high school IEP meetings to determine who talked in typical teacher-directed IEP meetings. In those meetings, students only talked during 3% of the IEP meeting time. Special educators spoke 51% of the time, family members spoke 15% of the time, general educators and administrators each spoke 9%, support personnel spoke 6%, and multiple conversations occurred during 5% of the meeting time. Finally, during 2%

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Figure 1. Percentage of Intervals That IEP Team Members Talked During Observed IEP Meetings

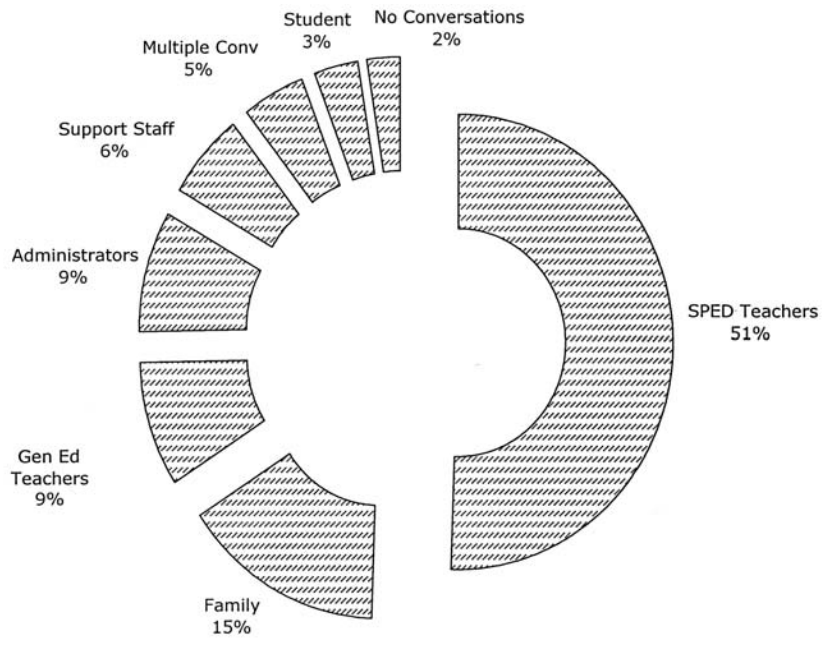

Figure 2. The Self-Directed IEP Leadership Steps

1. *Introduce self*
2. *Introduce IEP team members*
3. *State purpose of meeting*
4. *Review past goals and progress*
5. *Ask for feedback*
6. *Ask questions if did not understand*
7. *Deal with differences in opinion*
8. *State needed support*
9. *Express interests*
10. *Express skills and limits*
11. *Express options and goals*
12. *Close meeting by thanking everyone*

of the time at these observed IEP meetings, no conversation occurred at all, as Figure 1 indicates. The student contribution category therefore exceeded only the category in which no one was talking.

We must encourage them to participate actively in the IEP conversations.

How Do We Bring Students Into the IEP Conversations?

Student IEP Leadership Steps

Martin et al. (2006) used the 12 IEP leadership steps (Martin, Huber Marshall, Maxson, & Jerman, 1997) shown in Figure 2 to observe how students became involved in their IEPs. During the 109 teacher-directed IEP meetings, students expressed interests in 49.4% of the meetings, expressed options and goals in 27.1% of the meetings, and expressed skills and limits in 20% of the meetings. The researchers never observed students stating the purpose of the meeting, asking for feedback, or closing the meeting by thanking everyone. Students introduced themselves or other IEP team members, reviewed past goals and progress, asked questions when they did not understand, dealt with differences in opinion, or stated needed support at 6% or less of the meetings.

In Year 2 of the study (Martin, et al., in press), participating teachers randomly selected students for IEP instruction groups. That year, the researchers observed 130 IEP meetings: In 65 of those meetings, the students had received IEP leadership instruction; and in the other 65 meetings, the students had not. In the meetings observed after students had received IEP leadership instruction, the students' contribution increased across all 12 IEP leadership steps, with the largest increases occurring for introducing self and team members, stating the purpose of the meeting, reviewing past goals and progress, and expressing options and goals. Table 1 shows the 12 IEP leadership steps that students exhibited in Years 1 and 2 of the Martin et al. (in press) study. In the Year 2 IEP meetings that occurred after educators had taught students how to become involved, student participation also increased to 12% of the meeting time—a much more encouraging amount than the student contribution of 3% that occurred in the Year 1 teacher-directed meetings (see box, "What Does Research Reveal About Student Involvement in the IEP Process?").

Steps for Educators

Educators should incorporate student self-directed IEP instruction into the student's curriculum according to the needs of the student and the structure of the school day. Teachers in the Martin et al. (in press) study taught the 12 self-directed IEP lessons in a variety of ways. Teaching each lesson took approximately 45 minutes. Students received instruction over a 6-day period (two lessons per day), an 11-day period (one or two lessons per day), or in 1 day at a student leadership retreat. Teachers infused the self-directed IEP instruction into before-school or after-school student meetings, resource or study periods, and into the English, social studies, or social skills curriculum (see box, "What Do Educators Say After They Teach Students to Self-Direct Their IEPs?").

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Table 1. Student IEP Leadership Steps Exhibited in Study Years 1 and 2

IEP Leadership Steps	% of Students Who Exhibited Steps in Year 1 With No IEP Leadership Instruction	% of Students Who Exhibited Steps in Year 2 With No IEP Leadership Instruction	% of Students Who Exhibited Steps in Year 2 With IEP Leadership Instruction
Introduce self	0	0	70
Introduce IEP team members	0	0	77
State purpose of meeting	0	0	70
Review past goals and progress	0	1	53
Ask for feedback	0	0	22
Ask questions if did not understand	0	18	35
Deal with differences in opinion	0	15	17
State needed support	0	8	25
Express interests	49	62	72
Express skills and limits	20	9	43
Express options and goals	27	24	53
Close meeting by thanking everyone	0	0	14

Steps for Parents

Parents can take several steps to help their child become more than just an attendee at the IEP meeting. The parent needs to take many of these steps early in the child's life, such as learning early, along with the child, about his or her disability; learning how to talk comfortably about challenges in terms that the child can easily understand; and learning, along with the child, about the child's strengths, preferences, gifts, and needs (Bateman, Bright, & Boldin, 2003). Additionally, parents need to frequently remind their child of the importance of his or her strengths and gifts and how they contribute to the family, the classroom, and the IEP process. Beginning with the first IEP meeting, parents should expect their child to become an IEP team member, and they should talk to the child about his or her role in the IEP meeting (see box, "How Do Parents Respond to Student Involvement in IEP Meetings?"). Finally, parents need to frequently review progress toward IEP goals with their child (Bateman et al., 2003; Schoellar & Emanuel, 2003).

What Does Research Reveal About Student Involvement in the IEP Process?

During the past 10 years, self-determination has become such a central topic in special education literature that "promoting self-determination (SD) or teaching students to take control of their life, is becoming a hallmark of providing full and complete special education services" (Karvonen, Test, Wood, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004, p. 23). Research indicates that this hallmark is rarely achieved. Agran, Snow, and Swaner (1999) found that although 75% of middle and high school teachers rated SD skills as a high priority, 55% failed to include goals related to SD skills in any of their students' IEPs. Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (2000) found that only 22% of secondary teachers reported writing SD goals for all their students. Mason, et al. (2002) found that students and teachers highly value student involvement in the IEP planning process, but that study identified several logistical challenges that educators must resolve before they can implement SD practices: "Chief among these is finding the time necessary for adequate student preparation. With the trend away from pull-out resource rooms toward inclusion in the general classrooms, teachers are finding it difficult to schedule time to prepare students for IEP meetings" (p. 188). The question quickly becomes, "If teachers cannot find time to prepare students to self-direct their IEPs, how are they going to prepare students to self-direct their lives?"

To many students, the IEP process and meeting may appear as alien and awkward as an annual birthday party that they do not help plan or attend.

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What Do Educators Say After They Teach Students to Self-Direct Their IEPs?

Teachers involved in the Martin et al. (in press) study made the following comments after teaching the self-directed IEP to their students:

- A teacher who had taught the self-directed IEP lessons said—

  The students have taken much more interest in this than I thought they would. I think I just figured that since I knew all about IEPs and have talked about having to do IEP meetings so much, that my students would just somehow figure out what they were. I didn't think about actually teaching them about IEPs. Why would I have thought that they would learn this on their own?

- A teacher who had taught the first three lessons of the self-directed IEP said—

  The students are embarrassed and giggly in class about the role-playing. But it's a great way to teach them about social skills, like how to introduce someone by looking at them, and holding your head up, and making eye contact. They don't know it yet, but we're going to be role-playing the entire IEP in the counselor's office when we get further along with the lessons. I want them to practice in the environment where they're actually going to be doing this.

- A teacher who had conducted several student-directed IEP meetings said—

  This is a great way for students to learn to advocate for themselves, especially for the ones who have parents that can't or don't know how to advocate for them.

- A teacher who had taught students to self-direct their IEP meetings said—

  I agreed to take part in this study last year, but I wasn't sure at all about teaching my students about their IEPs. This year I'm totally into it. My students need to learn these skills. I see now that the IEP is a workable way to teach them about advocacy—and they understand more why they are in special education.

How Do Parents Respond to Student Involvement in IEP Meetings?

A speech-language pathologist who attended a student-directed IEP meeting made the following comment:

> *I was watching his mom's eyes as he was doing his part of the IEP in there, and I saw a tear. It's good to see students have a more active role, instead of being so passive. It took him a little longer to do his part, because of his speech delay, but I don't think anyone minded that. I was proud of him today.*

Martin, Huber, Marshall, et al. (2004) examined the perceptions of IEP meeting participants when students attended meetings. The results of this study indicated that student presence at IEP meetings adds value and validation to inviting students into the IEP process. Specifically, the researchers found that when students attended meetings, "Parents understood the reason for the meeting better, felt more comfortable saying what they thought, understood more of what was said, and knew better what to do next" (Martin, Huber, Marshall, et al., pp. 291, 293).

Grigal, Neubert, Moon, and Graham (2003) surveyed parents, general educators, and special educators about their views on self-determination and found that parents strongly supported IEP meeting participation and self-determination instruction. However, Grigal and colleagues noted that IEP meeting participation may have different meanings to different people and that some people may equate simply attending the meeting with participation. Other studies have confirmed this "attendance equals participation" notion (Field & Hoffman, 1994; Martin, Greene, & Borland, 2004).

A Different Way

To many students, the IEP process and meeting may appear as alien and awkward as an annual birthday party that they do not help plan and do not attend. The IEP process does not have to be that way. IDEA 2004 has continued to emphasize secondary transition planning that focuses on students' needs, preferences, and interests. The implication is twofold:

- Students need to be involved in the IEP process and their IEP meetings as soon as transition topics surface.
- Students need to learn about their IEPs and what to do at their IEP meetings well before they enter their secondary school years.

These implications, which are not new, have helped inspire fundamental changes in secondary special education and created opportunities for students to learn crucial self-advocacy and other self-determination skills during the transition process (Martin et al., 2006). Active student involvement at the IEP meeting is central to this process (Martin, Greene, & Borland, 2004). It is now up to professionals and parents to invite students into the IEP planning process and to support them while they

Then students can blow out candles of success as they transition into adulthood instead of wondering why a cake is on fire at a party to which no one invited them.

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learn how to be actively involved in their IEP meetings. Then students can blow out candles of success as they transition into adulthood instead of wondering why a cake is on fire at a party to which no one invited them.

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Funding provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs field initiated research (CFDA 84.324C). Grant award number H324C020045 partially supported the preparation of this manuscript.

TEACHING Exceptional Children, *Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 42–47.*

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