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Running head: INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM COMPLEXITIES

Individualized Education Program Complexities for Students with Autism

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Introduction

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) belongs to a group of closely-related neurobiological disorders. ASD is sometimes labeled as the "umbrella", due to the variety of severities the symptoms are manifested (ranging from those who are severely affected to those who show only mild effects who appear "nearly normal") (Phetrasuwan, Miles & Mesibov, 2009). Incidence of this disorder is on the rise and is also seen as a topic of increasing concern, especially among educators and parents due to the questions many have about it.

ASD was first defined by two Austrian psychiatrists in the 1940's characterized by "social aloofness, impaired social interactions, disturbances in language development, and rigidity, and problems with change" yet the first official clinical definition for autism was not published in the United States until 1980 (Phetrasuwan, et al., 2009). Presently, there are three key areas of development in which children with ASD exhibit problems: social interactions, severe delays or lack of language and communication skills and repetitive, stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. Deficits in social skills may be evident through a lack of understanding facial expressions and nonverbal behaviors that can occur during play time while children with ASD might prefer to play alone instead of with a peer. Communication difficulties might also include inability to initiate or maintain a conversation with others, repetitive use of language, and lack of imitative play. Students may show signs of obsessive and perseverating focus in certain areas of interests, inflexibility to routines and stereotyped and recurring motor mannerisms, such as flapping, which are known as "typical" behaviors of children with ASD.

Phetrasuwan, et al., (2009) stated that "approximately 1 in 150 children in the United States have ASD" and the symptoms of autism are classically manifested anywhere from infancy

to preschool age and are seen across all races and ethnicities. According to Autism Speaks, in 2014, 1 in 88 children and 1 in 54 boys in the United States are affected by autism. This is a pretty significant increase from 2009. Children are usually diagnosed through behavioral observations utilizing a checklist of symptoms of ASD since there are no biologic tests.

Individualized Education Programs

Individualized Education Programs (IEP) are an essential part of education for students with Autism. IEP's are an educational roadmap guiding students throughout their school career. IEP's require goals and objectives based on the individual's educational needs, interests, and preferences and should be directly related to general curriculum standards (Lynch, & Adams, 2008).

Difficulties with IEP's

Teachers have been known to express concerns about what skills and areas should be included in goals and objectives of students with ASD. Students' IEP's should contain goals and objectives not only related to their academic needs but also those addressing their language and social deficits. Intervention in the areas of positive interactions and relationships, from an early age and all throughout school, is an essential part of preparing students with ASD for their future. Encouraging relationships with peers is a way to give these students the skills they need in order to function in this increasingly independent world.

Also included in students' IEP are various adaptations allowed and needed to the student. These adaptations should be implemented everyday in the classroom as well as during administration of standardized assessment instruments in order for students to achieve maximum success. Adaptations, such as accommodations and modifications, are definitely an essential part of IEP's, but only when they are integrated and executed correctly (Wilson, Kowalski, &

Spencer, 2005). However, decisions regarding appropriate accommodations and modifications which should be included on student's IEP can be difficult. Lack of ability specific accommodations can often be detrimental to the progress of students with ASD. The severity of the student's autism and possible coinciding disabilities will help the students IEP team determine exactly how the student will participate in daily class activities and assessments.

Parental involvement and active student participation are other issues commonly seen when discussing IEP complexities. It was suggested that active student involvement will provide children with autism multiple practice opportunities of self-determination skills in areas such as goal setting, decision making, and problem solving (Konrad & Test, 2007). Unfortunately most of the time students and their families are not active participants.

This paper will discuss various issues such as how to write effective standard-based IEP objectives, how to implement students' goals and objectives into everyday routines, possible curricula, preparing students with ASD for their futures, IEP's related to classroom activities and assessments and how to get parents and students actively involved in the IEP process. These issues that are commonly recognized when looking at the entire IEP process have multiple recommendations for improvement. I believe that educators should be taking a closer look at these suggestions in order to proactively prevent these issues from continuously recurring.

Review of Literature:

Writing goals and objectives

As stated previously, IEP objectives for students with autism are a vital part of their educational experiences. IEP goals and objectives may be difficult to understand if you are not the person who actually wrote them. The wording of the IEP must be very clear and concise for

all personnel who will be reading it. When writing the IEP annual goals, they should be written with measurable goals that clearly indicate the progress to be made by the end of the year along with the use of common, familiar terms (Holtz, Ziegert & Baker, 2004). I have experienced difficulties with understanding and implementing students' IEP objectives written by other educators. If the goals are not clear and measurable it may be difficult to implement and monitor student's progress towards these goals. Together with the annual goals, the short term objectives in the IEP should also be written in clear and measurable terms as smaller steps of progression toward each of the students annual goals.

Contemporary classrooms have students with diverse and unique educational needs and this is a challenge for both special and general educators. During my student teaching internship, I had a class with goals and objectives that looked very different for each and every student because they are to be based off that particular student's needs. It was very difficult at times to precisely meet each students needs, especially if the needed supports were not available to educators. Due to changes in the laws such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 and No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, all students are supposed to have access to the general education curriculum and statewide assessments (Lynch, & Adams, 2008). A much needed focus on communication and social interactions in the case of students with ASD may appear as a challenge for educators in meeting the demands of the general education curriculum and classroom. Although developing standard based IEPs may be a solution, it is not an easy task

As a way to decrease these struggles teachers often face when writing IEP objectives, research was conducted on standard-based IEP's and their benefits (Lynch, & Adams, 2008). Standard-based IEP's not only help teachers become more aware of their students' present levels

(adaptive skills, cognitive skills, etc.), they also assist the child with progression in the curriculum of functional and academic skills.

The objectives for students with autism not only need to be related to contents areas such as math, language arts, science and social studies, but teachers should also be integrating daily life skills into their instruction (Lynch, & Adams, 2008). When developing IEP objectives for students with autism, teachers should also consider their needs of support (such as paraprofessionals) as well as areas of academics and social skills that need improvement. Sadly this is not always the case for students with disabilities. In past placements, I have witnessed students who unfortunately did not have the best advocates and therefore were not receiving all of the supports they needed in order to be successful in their academic environment. Teaching of academic and functional skills should be integrated and taught together in one curriculum approach as much as possible. In order to effectively develop students' IEP objectives another essential consideration is looking at students' present level of functioning. Students often show better progress when objectives are measurable and based on their level, which I have observed in various field experiences. Sometimes teachers have difficulties writing objectives that are related closely enough with the state standards in combination with meeting the needs of the student.

Glimps (2008) stated "children are growing up in a whole new world" and "we have a responsibility to see that they understand that world" (page 5). More and more, researchers, educators, parents, etc. are expressing concerns for our rapidly changing world and our individuals with autism within it. Glimps (2008) poses a very unsettling question, "Did these students participate in a K-12 curriculum that prepared them for globalization?" Whether it is typically functioning students or those with disabilities, as educators it is our responsibility to

teach our students how to become citizens who understand the world, are proficient in other languages, and knowledgeable of multiple diversities and cultures. As a way to incorporate these skills into our instruction for students with ASD, global education should be included alongside the math, reading, and social skill objectives in students' IEP's (Glimps, 2008).

One of the critical reasons to prepare students with autism to be globally competent is due to the driving demand of internationally competent workers. When our students grow into adults, they must be able to establish meaningful relationships with people in order to function as typical, independent adults. In order to secure a good job in areas such as business, government, health care, law enforcement, etc. there are new ongoing requirements of global skills and competencies. When in the workplace, students will most likely encounter multiple situations involving diversity, poverty, etc. Being considered "global citizens" encompasses many important skills including; critical thinking, problem solving, self-determination, creativity, quick learners, leadership, communication, collaboration, etc. Although mastering these skills prior to entering the workforce as an adult will not always be easy, it is essential to provide students with ASD the necessary competencies to become proficient citizens.

Adaptations

The following table explains the definition of the two types of adaptations, accommodations and modifications (Wilson, Kowalski & Spencer, 2005).

<u>Type of Adaptation</u>	<u>Definition</u>	<u>Example</u>
Accommodation	Changes in instruction or assessment that are necessary for students with disabilities to successfully participate, that do not change the actual content or lower any standards on assessments.	A first grade class is expected to write a journal entry with three sentences on standard lined paper but the student with ASD may use paper with a dotted midline.
Modification	Changes in instruction or assessment that are necessary for students with disabilities to successfully participate,	A first grade class is expected to write a journal entry with three sentences but the student

	which do change the actual content, expectations or lower standards on assessments.	with ASD is only required to write one sentence.
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Although IEP's do give students with autism the legal right to receive adaptations in multiple areas involving academics, there are still some flaws with this practice. All accommodations and modifications must not only be listed but also justified in the IEP (Wilson et al., 2005). This becomes a problem if individuals' specific adaptations are not described and justified according to assessment guidelines. This would result in difficulties taking standardized assessments and students who need any type of adaptation would not be as successful without their adaptations.

These adaptations should be very specific and are another essential part of students' IEP's. Adaptations are needed in order for students with ASD to have smooth and trouble-free experiences with statewide assessments and classroom activities (Wilson et al., 2005). Not only do the adaptations help with testing but they also give support to the students with their daily functioning in the educational settings. For example, during my internship in an inclusive classroom, there were many students who needed to have both accommodations and modifications to assessments and everyday assignments. Some students needed a scribe to write for them as they verbally explained their responses for assignments, others needed frequent breaks throughout the day and many of the students needed shortened or differentiated work. If these students did not have the needed supports, they would be very unproductive in the general education classroom.

Implementation of Goals and Objectives

Once teachers finally master the skill of creating academic and functional related standard-based IEP objectives, implementation of the student's goals and objectives seems to be

a recurring concern for teachers of children with autism (Jung, Gomez, Baird, & Keramidas, 2008). Writing of a student's IEP does not end the process. It is important this program receives support and guidance from general educators, special educators, and to the student's family as well. It is said by Jung et al. (2008) that with these needed supports, the IEP team is better able to "close this gap by providing systematic plans for intervention that connect IEP goals with strategies to use in everyday classroom routines" (page 26). Teachers and families of students with ASD have the power to collaborate and select objectives for the student along with ways to implement them based on his/her everyday routines. This is of such importance because when objectives are implemented in meaningful ways, students are more likely to be successful in getting on track with their education and at closer academic levels to that of their typically developing peers.

Although we know it is best to implement goals and objectives into students' daily routines and curriculum, this is often a struggle for many educators. Many times students' social and functional skill goals do not match up with the coursework that goes on during class. Teachers now have to figure out a way to incorporate these students' goals into their lessons and their instruction. Due to the number of standards and skills that are already required to be taught throughout the year, and the dreadful thought of being pressured to "teach to the tests", it is difficult to fit everything in. Educators' jobs get especially complex when adding a student or multiple students' goals and objectives into the mix. For instance, the inclusion classroom I was placed in had multiple students with ASD with all types of different personalities and behaviors. A couple of the students had more severe behavior issues that took up a lot of teacher time and attention while others were quiet. If an educator was busy taking care of a problem behavior with one student, I often noticed the more "well behaved" student getting left behind and not

really participating much with the class. Issues such as not enough support in the classroom need to be recognized and addressed as soon as possible so that educators are sure to meet each individual student's needs.

While trying to create the “perfect” goals and objectives for the student, it is crucial to look at the student’s daily schedule and from there work with all teachers and family members involved to determine the best times to implement strategies. It is suggested that strategies are best achievable when they are incorporated into the child’s natural routines (Jung, et al., 2008). In order to steer clear of any problems, special educators need to work with the classroom teacher as much as possible to try to determine when implementation works best for both the teachers and student.

To avoid any further issues with implementation, it is necessary to make sure everyone involved in the student’s intervention knows how to correctly apply the strategies (Jung, et al., 2008). Team work and communication are possibly the most crucial part of this entire process. Majority of information on student’s progress, or lack thereof, can be obtained simply through observations and conversations between team members.

IEP Team

Students' IEP team should consist of the student, parents, and any other professionals that work with them. The professionals who may be part of the team include the student's special educator, general educator, speech language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, school psychologist, counselor, and anyone else who is involved with the student’s education (Holtz, Ziegart & Baker, 2004).

Parental and Student Involvement

Parental involvement in their child's IEP has many benefits. Parent participation in the IEP process does not simply mean attending the annual IEP meeting (Spann Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Full participation includes parent's involvement and input on areas such as the development of objectives, interventions, methods of evaluation, etc. As a result of the new laws in IDEA, stating that parents are now considered equal participants in their child's IEP team, parental attendance has improved, but it is not to say the same for full participation throughout the process.

Students with autism will benefit in multiple ways if they are also actively involved in their IEP process alongside their parents. Students with autism who are active participants will have multiple practice opportunities of self-determination skills in areas such as goal setting, decision making, and problem solving (Konrad & Test, 2007). For example Mason, Field and Sawilowsky (2004) report that research supports, "youth who are involved in their IEP development or related educational goal setting and planning are more likely to achieve their goals, improve their academic skills, develop important self-advocacy and communication skills, graduate from high school, and gain better employment and quality of life as adults" (page 441). These are all essential skills for students with autism to achieve in order to live successful, independent lives in their futures. Unfortunately throughout my many field experiences, I have only once had a student attend their IEP meeting. Even during the meeting in which the student was in attendance, he was just that, present and unaware of anything that was going on during that meeting.

Self-determination is described by Test, Mason, Hughes, Konrad, Neale and Wood (2004) as, "the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (page 391). This skill is often seen more in students who fully participate in

their IEP's along with self-advocacy. Choice making, problem-solving, and self-regulation are also much needed skills that can be gained throughout student involvement of the IEP process. Once students have mastered these skills, they will be better able to assume responsibility for their own lives and smoothly transition from the structure of school out into the larger community environment. One of the most beneficial ways to achieve such skills is by having students practice these behaviors over a period of many years. If educators begin teaching these skills at an early age, students will be more likely to achieve mastery of the skills needed to become self-determined and responsible individuals.

Classroom Perspective

Many of the previously stated IEP issues and concerns are often seen in the classroom. For example, although students' individual needs should be represented through functional and academic skills equally, it is not always the case (Lynch, & Adams, 2008). Majority of classrooms only focus on teaching academic skills, so students can do well on standardized tests. There should be a greater focus on globalization skills such as being aware of the world around oneself. These skills must be taught through collaboration between IEP team members and should be incorporated into everyday routines in order to achieve the utmost value for students. Cultural awareness and global connections can be incorporated into curriculum in subjects such as geography, economics, physical sciences, and humanities, and it is easy to include literature, art, language and much more into the instruction of these topics (Glimps, 2008).

Rethink Autism Curriculum

When looking for a curriculum that meets students specific needs while also meeting the educational/academic demands that are put on teachers, options seem to be very slim.

Throughout my internship in a school at an American military base in Germany, I became familiar with a new curriculum used specifically for students with autism. This curriculum, called *Rethink Autism*, is designed to help these students in many ways especially meeting goals and objectives in areas such as language and social skills (more information can be found online at www.rethinkfirst.com). The level and activities that students complete during their rethink sessions depend not only on their goals and objectives but also align with the Common Core standards and the students' present level of functioning. As students gain mastery of each lesson/activity they are permitted to move onto the next level of that skill or may move on to different skill set. Using this curriculum helped motivate my student to work hard, master skills and move to the next level.

In order to be trained to use *Rethink Autism*, educators and paraprofessionals watch online video lessons. *Rethink Autism* is based on the effective educational interventions of applied behavior analysis (ABA), and as such, it is more affordable than finding actual certified ABA therapists (About Rethink, n.d.). The *Rethink Autism* video library is filled with tutorials on how to teach hundreds of different skills. These video lessons were developed by caring clinicians who have years of experience with the ABA-based teaching interventions.

Although a possible option that helps incorporate Common Core standards, *Rethink Autism* may not work for all educators and students. Ideally this program could be a great solution to many problems involving writing and implementing student goals and objectives into the daily routines and curriculum, but the issue lies within the simple fact that not all schools have this program available for their educators and paraprofessionals to use. The elementary school I was placed in was fortunate enough to have an "autism guru" present and active within

the school. Although there are online tutorials, he is a professional who provided weekly hands on modeling and taught other educators how to use this curriculum.

Parental involvement is something that I have experienced firsthand through practicum placements and student teaching internships, and have had both positive and negative experiences. I have seen parents who are deeply involved with their child and his/her special education services and where they are their child's biggest advocate and continuously prove that they want what is best for their child. But on the other hand I have also witnessed parents who seem to have nothing to do with their child's IEP and educators struggle to even communicate with them. This is an unfortunate situation. Hopefully more parents will begin to realize the importance of being active participants in their children's special education services.

In order to keep students actively involved alongside their parents, there are several curricula that are available which specifically target active student involvement in the IEP process and help with the development of skills such as self-awareness, goal setting and attainment, assertive communication, conflict resolution and reflection (Mason et al., 2004).

Future Perspective

IEP's clearly have a huge impact on the field of special education. It is essential that IEP teams of students with autism find ways to include everyone involved. Collaboration in the creation of goals and objectives is a great way to boost student confidence and self-determination. In order to achieve this goal, teams should be aware of a variety of instructional methods and effective practices to select strategies that will best fit each individual situation (Jung et al., 2008).

Although students with autism do typically have difficulties with social interactions, it does not mean that students remain socially "awkward" their entire lives. With the appropriate supports from educators, therapists and family members, students with ASD can learn how to interact properly and create long-lasting relationships with peers and adults (Holtz et al., 2004). My hopes for the future are that professionals and parents as well, will continue to advocate for this type of education for our students with autism. Implementation of functional, social, academic and globalization skills should be included in curriculum that is taught to students with ASD on a daily basis and should be reflected in their goals and objectives for their IEP's (Glimps, 2008). *Rethink Autism* is definitely a viable option for special educators schools should begin to explore. Some of the benefits of utilizing this curriculum include rapid student success as they master one level and move onto the next along with generalization skills. The curriculum will be acknowledged better as more research is published using this curriculum.

Conclusion

Mason et al. (2004) stated that "student involvement in goal setting should include both student understanding and involvement with long- and short-term planning" (page 448). I believe this is a very true statement that needs to be followed by all educators. Educators and parents as well, can think of strategies to get students involved in their IEP's. Students should have clearly stated goals and objectives including, but not limited to, social and behavioral goals in their IEP. Student progress on their goals and objectives should be regularly monitored and recorded (Holtz, et al., 2004).

In my future classroom, I will try to involve my students in their educational goals at the earliest possible age. It will also be an extremely important goal of mine to also get all of my

students' parents actively involved in not only their IEP's but their overall education and special education services. I will also incorporate global studies and social/daily living skills into my teaching in fun and meaningful ways. I am a firm believer that this subject should get much more attention in schools than it currently does. Hopefully this will begin to change in the near future, and we will better prepare students for the "real world". Since I am more aware of the importance's of specific aspects of IEP's and their relationship to the advancement of students with autism in our every day society, I will be sure to work with families when writing IEP goals, objectives, and adaptations. I want to make sure parents realize the importance of providing their child with the adaptations and services needed to live a "normal" adult life in their future.

My plan as a future educator is to follow through with my belief that all educators (general and special educators) should be looking into the many available curriculum options and ideas in order to prevent these issues with IEPs in the future.

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