

IMPACT OF IEP INSTRUCTION TO INCREASE PARTICIPATION WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

by

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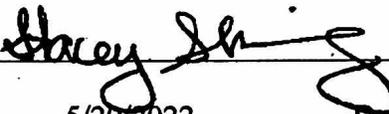
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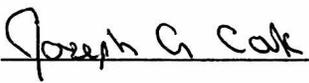
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gain perspective into self-determination skills and how to help students achieve them. This researcher tried to determine if the use of *Self-Directed IEP* curriculum was impactful enough to increase a student's knowledge about the IEP process so that they will be comfortable enough to attend and speak up at their own meetings. The students who participated in this study were secondary students that were identified with high functioning autism. The question of research for this study was: Does the use of Self-Directed IEP curriculum lead to an increased understanding of the IEP components in high school students on the autism spectrum? Students completed Likert scale surveys before and after the *Self-Directed IEP* curriculum. Surveys were created to reflect the major components of the IEP process. Overall, students made improvements in all areas of the survey and felt comfortable to attend their own IEP meetings.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Background Information	2
Definitions.....	2
Research Problem and Purpose	3
Findings and Implications	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review.....	6
Self-Determination	7
IEP Process.....	9
Barriers to Involvement.....	10
Student IEP Participation	11
IEP Curriculum and Instruction	12
Conclusion.....	15
Chapter 3 Methods.....	16
Setting and Participants.....	16
Procedure.....	16
Self-Directed IEP Curriculum.....	17
Data and Analysis.....	18
Chapter 4 Results	20
Surveys	20
Student Results.....	22
Student 1	22
Student 2	22
Student 3	22
Student 4.....	22
Student 5.....	23
Student 6.....	23
Student 7	23
Student 8.....	23
Conclusion.....	24

Chapter 5 Discussion	25
Intervention	25
Unexpected Outcomes.....	26
Strengths and Limitations.....	27
Implications.....	28
Conclusion.....	29
References.....	30
Appendices.....	33
Appendix A	33
Appendix B	35
Appendix C	36

Chapter 1 Introduction

In high schools today, there are many students that do not know what their goals or accommodations are. In fact, many students don't even realize they have an individualized education plan (IEP) or that they can be an active participant in developing their plans.

During my first few years working with high school age students with an IEP, there was a common theme that most of my students did not want to attend their meetings. Students with IEPs need to develop skills in self-determination to have control in their lives. These skills need to be taught. However, many in the field feel that students will just acquire these skills by attending the IEP meetings. Branding et al. (2009) found that students that got involved in their plans and meetings developed a better understanding of the disability, identified their strengths and areas of concern, and developed an increase in self-determination skills.

An added area of focus has been self-determination which is based on students with IEPs having meaningful participation and increased quality of life across all domains. Students that are 16 and older are asked to participate in a post-secondary transition plan with areas focusing on preparing them to lead independent lives and have the skills to speak up for their needs. Participating in their IEP at a younger age allows them to develop the skills to make important decisions about their lives while surrounded with the support of adults who want to see them succeed. This researcher sought to identify how students with autism could develop those skills.

Research has been done in the area of self-determination and the importance of developing the seven skill sets that are included in self-determination (Carter et al., 2008). These skill sets will be addressed further in chapter two. Parents and teachers alike felt the importance of students developing self-determination skills but were unsure of how to teach them. IEP

curricula and interventions have promoted self-determination skills that increased confidence, self-advocacy skills, and helped the students plan for their life after high school.

Background Information

Researchers found that special educators were generally in agreement on the importance of students developing the skills for self-determination, but the trend has continued that parents and educators advocate for the student (Arndt et al., 2006). While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) has supported the idea of students attending their own meetings and having a say, many students are reporting that they do not feel welcome or feel like their voice is even heard when they have attended their meetings (Cavendish & Connor, 2018).

Several different IEP curricula and interventions have been developed to assist teachers with teaching the skills needed for self-determination. The outcomes for many of these programs have led to increased confidence, self-advocacy skills, and planning for their life after high school (Royer, 2016; Woods et al. 2013). Additional information regarding curricula and interventions can be found in chapter 2.

Definitions

Individualized Education Program (IEP) – a legal document under federal law that is created for public school children in the United States that require special education (Hart & Brehm, 2013).

Self-Directed IEP – evidence-based instruction practice that teaches special education students to become active participants in their IEP meetings with support as needed (Branding et al., 2009).

Self-Determination – having the ability and opportunity to steer one’s life in a direction contributes to a personally satisfying lifestyle (McDougal et al., 2009).

Transition Planning – the process to help a student with an IEP decide and plan for they want to do after high school (Fleming-Castaldy & Bauck Horning, 2013).

Research Problem and Purpose

The problem for this study is that while educators get some of their students to their IEP meetings, they are not teaching them the skills to participate. Researchers studying IEP participation and understanding found that parents and teachers alike agree that students with a disability need to develop the skills to be confident and have self-determination to make important choices and problem solve (Branding et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2008; Carter et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2004; Royer, 2016). Unfortunately, the missing piece is looking at the IEP document and teaching the students the skills they need using a real-life article to practice with that pertains to real important decisions that are about them. Many people assume that by attending meetings, students are developing these skills. The problem with this is that if they aren't given time to practice the skills or why they are important, there isn't any value to why they should participate. A resource class is primarily used for direct instruction time within a high school that teaches skills other than academics, such as functional, executive, and often social skills.

The purpose of this research study was to determine whether the impact of the Self-Directed IEP curriculum can increase student knowledge and understanding in the IEP process for secondary students with autism. This study took place in a large district within a midwestern state with a focus solely on students with high functioning autism in a secondary program. Participants studied skills to lead to self-determination within the IEP process. This researcher measured the student's change in knowledge and comfort in attending and participating in their own IEP meeting. Specifically, this research aimed to answer the question: Does the use of the

Self-Directed IEP curriculum lead to an increased understanding of the IEP process in IEP meetings of high school students on the autism spectrum?

The method of study began with a pre-intervention survey using a Likert scale. The survey addressed if students knew what an IEP is and got more detailed to ask questions about what is in an IEP and how comfortable they are in understanding what is in their own IEP. Following the survey, students engaged in an IEP curriculum to learn about IEPs and how they can participate in their own meetings. Upon completion of the intervention, students were asked to complete the same survey with the same Likert scale. All data was analyzed with the use of a table to analyze individual growth in each section of the IEP that is covered in the survey. More details related to data collection and analysis can be found in chapter three.

This research helps guide special educators to teach self-determination skills and affect the outcome of students attending and actively participating in their IEP. These skills lead to an increased quality of life and a say in their post-secondary future. The results can help shape teacher and student perceptions about the IEP process and place an increased importance on student development and participation for a successful transition to adult life after high school.

Findings and Implications

Eight students completed a survey before and after the curriculum, Self-Directed IEP. Each student was assessed individually on their knowledge and understanding pre and post intervention of the main components of an IEP. Overall, students made improvements in all eleven areas that were surveyed. One student found he didn't know as much about his goal progress as he thought he did before the intervention. All students agreed they were now comfortable to attend their own IEP meetings. More details regarding the student outcomes can be found in chapter four.

This chapter provided some background information, the primary area of research, the significance and purpose of this study, as well as a description of the limitations. Chapter two provides a deeper review of literature and research on self-determination, the IEP process, IEP curricula, and the outcomes of student led IEP meetings. Chapter three discusses the design and methods for the study. It includes the school's demographics, how data will be collected, and procedure methods. Chapter four provides detailed student results of the surveys pre and post intervention. Lastly, chapter five contains a discussion of the results, what they mean, and what future researchers can take away from these results.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Meaningful participation for students in their IEP supports the development of self-determination skills. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (2004) pushed this idea to meet developmental goals so that the students became successful, independent adults.

McDougall et al. (2009) shared that self-determination is “Autonomous behaviors and beliefs that lead to personal choice and ultimately control over one’s life” (p. 252). They went on to state that “Self-determination is considered by many to be the most important outcome of the education system” (p. 153). This skill positively related to individuals’ ability to seek employment and become independent with management of their personal finances. Youth and young adults who have become self-determined were able to make these changes which have increased their quality of life.

Hart and Brehm (2013) reported that when students were self-determined they could assert their voice, as needed, took pride in their accomplishments and abilities, and were able to self-advocate. As students became stronger advocates, they took on a more proactive role and had a role in their individualized education plans (IEP). Students that have learned self-determination skills have developed a knowledge of their strengths, needs, interests, and their own behavior. Researchers have become more aware of the importance of teaching these skills at a younger age to increase IEP participation.

The importance of student-led IEP extends beyond the high school experience and into self-advocacy, whether that be in post-secondary education or one’s career. As students participate more in their planning, they develop a voice and confidence. Students are more likely to work towards goals and graduation if they help set the goals towards what they want to do after high school (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Hart and Brehm (2013) identified a 10-step

process to teach students how to self-advocate which has led to self-determination. A key step in the process shared the students' IEP goals and asked for their assistance in creating goals. This was a critical step which allowed students to make a connection between their success in school to finding success in their future employment.

Students are likely to engage more with their transition planning, parents and families will feel more involved and included in the decision process for the IEP, and teachers will be able to build a team directly around the student developed goals. The process of developing the IEP will allow the student to identify their own strengths, be able to explain their disability, and determine what services of special education are provided for them. In addition, as students develop the skills to speak up for their needs, they will develop a lifelong skill that is useful to more than just their educational needs.

Self-Determination

Michael Wehmeyer (2013) has done significant of research and studies on self-determination, choice, and the effects that having those skills had on quality of life. Over the course of several years, Wehmeyer has altered the definition of self-determination to fit with the changing dynamics of how people with a disability are serviced and how they are learning to speak up for themselves more through self-advocacy instruction. He has defined self-determined behavior as actions that enable an individual to be the main person making their own choices and decisions that will improve their quality of life (Wehmeyer & Abery, 2013). In 2013, Wehmeyer and Abery, took the definition a little further to explain that "Self-determined people are, in essence, actors in their own lives, rather being acted upon" (p. 400).

McDougall et al. (2009) conducted a study with students in a post-secondary transition program. They measured the students' self-determination skills in relation to their perceived

quality of life both before and after the program. The researchers collected data over a four-year period. The participants of this study shared that their quality of life had increased in the areas of participation of work or volunteer and community recreation activities from an increase in their self-determination skills.

Carter et al. (2008) studied 340 educators across eight high schools, diverse ethnically and economically. The educators completed a rating scaled on seven instructional domains that correlated to self-determination. The seven domains of self-determination include: choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy and leadership, self-management and self-regulation, and self-awareness and self-knowledge. Carter and his colleagues define these domains in the following ways:

- Choice making refers to an individual's ability to choose a preference when two or more options are given.
- Decision making is the ability to create possible solutions while selecting the best option. The individual would understand how that decision would affect themselves and others.
- Problem solving skills are the ability to respond to a problem and create a possible solution to a challenging situation or problem.
- Goal setting is the ability to identify a goal they want to reach and create a plan to reach that goal.
- Self-advocacy and leadership are the ability to stand up for their rights, communicate effectively and assertively, and the ability to be an effective leader or member of a team.

- Self-management and self-regulation mean an individual can monitor and evaluate their own behavior. They can set a schedule and self-direct their learning through strategies learned such as self-instruction.
- Self-awareness and self-knowledge are the ability to accurately identify their own strengths and limitations. The individual can identify their preferences, interests, abilities and use that knowledge to enhance their successes.

The majority of the educators agreed on the high levels of importance for teaching the seven domains of self-determination. Ratings from special educators were generally higher than those of general educators, but the two teams shared high importance values in the areas of problem solving, self-management, and decision making (Carter et al., 2008).

Carter et al. (2013) conducted a study of 68 parents with a young adult with an intellectual disability (ID) or autism. The participants of the study were sent surveys as long as their dependent was 19-22 years old, receiving special education services under ID or autism programming, and were currently enrolled in one of their randomly selected districts. Parents in large part indicated a high importance for their children to learn each of the seven elements of self-determination, however, the young adults were not able to perform those skills very well yet.

IEP Process

The IEP meeting is the process of developing an individualized education plan for school-aged children, ages 3-21, that have a disability and are receiving special education services (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). This process is comprised of a team that includes at minimum one parent or guardian of the student, the student, when old enough and they want to participate, a general education and special education teacher, a Local Educational Agency (LEA) representative, and other teaching staff that may interact with or provide services

to the student. The members of the team may change over time but must meet a minimum of one time per year. Each meeting should be a collaborative process of everyone in attendance and focus on the strengths of the students, identify academic and function present levels, create goals to work on for the next year, and determine what services and accommodations are to be provided for the student.

When the student is aged 16 or older, per IDEA, the team, including student, should address post-secondary plans known as the transition plan. Researchers have found that when students participate in creating their own transition plan, they demonstrate a greater motivation and a greater ability to succeed in their goals in comparison to students that have not participated in their IEP meetings and transition plans (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010).

Barriers to Involvement

Many researchers agree that students are more successful when they not only attend but participate in their IEP meetings (Cavendish & Connor, 2018, Martin et al., 2006, Fleming-Castaldy & Horning, 2013). In a study by Cavendish and Connor (2018) a major obstacle was recorded where one school followed an informal principle where if the parents did not attend the meeting in person, then the student did not come. Students reported when they did attend, they felt the meeting was not about them and did not feel included. Parents reported barriers of schedules not allowing for in-person meetings, not feeling heard due to language barriers or understanding due to the unfamiliar IEP jargon used, and too much focuses on student deficits which left them feeling emotionally drained (Cavendish & Connor 2018).

While legislation and federal mandates have made clear the importance of students attending and being involved for the IEP in which they turn 16, two researchers have found that many schools are not in compliance (Fleming-Castaldy & Bauck-Horning, 2013). According to

the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) amendments, we must consider the student's strengths, interests, and preferences. Students and parents must be invited with the opportunity to be involved in the transition process amendments require students and families to be involved in the transition process so that personal preferences and interests are taken into consideration. Fleming-Castaldy and Bauck-Horning (2013), found that although this participation is mandated, the student or family participation is not consistently obtained. In fact, one third of participants in this study did not include student participation in any part of the educational planning. Researchers of this study outlined the factors that lead to successful transitions compared to the barriers that can inhibit the success. A qualitative single case study was conducted that led to the single participant developing confidence, independence, and self-determination skills following an effective transition experience.

Student IEP Participation

Students should have started to attend their IEPs to voice their opinions on their learning plans. Branding et al. (2009) studied the perceptions from special educators and rehabilitation practitioners of self-determination skills. The participants viewed video simulations of external-directed and self-directed IEPs. Branding et al. found that curriculum initiatives needed to be expanded to find more effective ways to teach self-determination skills.

Using an online survey, Mason et al. (2004) obtained 523 usable responses from all 50 states and Australia, Bahamas, Canada, and Kenya. All participants were employed in the education serviced field. The researchers found that participants placed a high importance value on student participation in their IEP. Researchers also found that while educators perceptions on participation was extremely important, teaching the student the skills to participate was more difficult.

Doronkin et al. (2020) conducted a study to detail what happened in a typical IEP meeting led by secondary special education teacher across nine meetings that totaled 51 participants. Their purpose was meant to analyze the role of the students during the meeting, how much the student contributed or was involved, and to look at what content or structure guided the meeting. Researchers found that many students felt uncomfortable at their own meetings by feeling unwelcomed and disrespected. The way the IEP meetings were structured at the secondary level did not allow for meaningful student involvement. One suggested note by Doronkin et al. (2020) was that to increase student involvement, students needed to be invited and attend their IEP meetings starting at a much younger age.

The researchers stated the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA included three new reforms on transition that were meant to increase student involvement in their IEP to improve their post-secondary outcomes (Martin et al. 2006). IDEA of 2004 kept and maintained these same requirements. Researchers found that without prior instruction about their role in the IEP meeting, students did not know how to behave, understand the language, and did not feel like their voice was heard. Increased student presence at their own IEP did not correlate to participation. Students that were supported and instructed prior to involvement of their IEP had a better understanding of the purpose for an IEP and the goals for the transition planning. Martin et al (2006) concluded that this process should open a dialogue for planning before the meeting to ensure that the student's interests, preferences, and transition needs are a focus.

IEP Curriculum and Instruction

As educators and parents have agreed on the importance of secondary students learning self-determination skills, several researchers have reviewed IEP curricula that focused on teaching those skills (Kozik, 2018; Royer, 2016; Woods et al., 2013). The three curricula

addressed in this section include *My IEP*, *Self-Directed IEP*, and *Artificial Inquiry*. The *Artificial Inquiry* hoped to help students understand their own capabilities and how those can affect their future (Kozik, 2018).

The goal of the *My IEP* curriculum was to facilitate student learning of IEP information (Royer, 2016). *My IEP* was designed to facilitate knowledge and increase participation in IEPs through use of graphic organizers (Royer, 2016). The focus of this method was to see an increase in motivation, participation, and enjoyment at their own meetings. The participants included 52 male and female, ninth grade students. A comparison study was conducted with some students using *My IEP* while the remaining students used the *Know Your IEP* curriculum. Royer shared that four significant results were revealed through the *My IEP* curriculum that included students fully leading their IEPs, the amount of time students talked increased from between three to six percent to 36.78%, there was not a significant difference in length of meetings, and finally the students were able to remember more of the information in their IEP when they had to present the information rather than listen to someone else.

The *Self-Directed IEP* curriculum was an evidence-based practice aimed at students becoming more active members at their IEP meetings (Martin et al, 2006; Woods et al., 2013). The researchers used an exploratory mixed-methods study to follow a student that completed the *Self-Direct IEP* intervention. The researchers found that the student was able to increase how much he spoke at the meeting, developed a clearer picture for post-secondary employment, and increased his leadership during the meeting. The *Self-Directed IEP* began with watching videos followed by the student participating in role playing. A student workbook was part of the process, and the student was able to develop a script that worked with her current and new IEP goals. This process encouraged and enabled the student by allowing her actual practice with

feedback from her teacher. These skills were transferred to the meeting that began with power points to remind the team that the meeting was for the student and identified suggestions on how they could support her participation and direct comments or questions to give control back to the student. Woods and colleagues identified three themes that were evident in this study: the student was able to identify clearer goals and dreams for post-secondary, she increased her confidence, and she increased her self-advocacy.

Similarly, Martin et al. (2006) found that under current practices, students were expected to understand the process of the meetings by having attended previous meetings. Students and adults participated in this study that examined IEP prior knowledge, transition issues, how the student behaved in the meeting, and perceptions of their completed IEP meeting. Researchers concluded that the intervention of the *Self-Directed IEP* curriculum led to students starting their meetings, talking more throughout the meeting, engaged in leadership steps, had much higher positive perceptions upon completion of their meetings, and identified and shared their interests and skills.

The *Artificial Inquiry* hoped to help students understand their own capabilities and how those can affect their future (Kozik, 2018). Kozik (2018) looked at a different intervention method that intended to promote positive IEP meetings by allowing students to take turns, speak-up, and self-advocate in their meetings. The method was called Artificial Inquiry (AI) and taught the students to plan for their future based on successes from their past. Kozik (2018) concluded that students were encouraged to participate with direct questioning led by their successes and points of strength.

Conclusion

Overall, many researchers have identified the importance of students' learning to self-direct their IEPs. Additionally, Carter et al. (2008) and Carter et al. (2013) revealed that educators and parents alike share a common importance of students striving for self-determination skills. IEP curricula and interventions have promoted self-determination skills that increased confidence, self-advocacy skills, and helped the students plan for their life after high school (Royer, 2016; Woods et al., 2013).

This review of literature supports positive outcomes for students participating in self-directing their IEPs. It is important to note, while several studies have supported this idea, more research needs to be completed on other IEP curricula and the effects they have on students. More specifically does the use of IEP intervention programs lead to increased understanding of the IEP process in IEP meetings of High School students on the Autism Spectrum?

Chapter 3 Methods

The purpose of this field report study was to determine how much high school students on the autism spectrum knew and understood of the IEP process. An increase in understanding should lead to an increase in participation. The study question for this research project asked does the use of the Self-Directed IEP curriculum lead to an increased perception of understanding of the IEP components of high school students on the autism spectrum?

Setting and Participants

The school where research was conducted was located in a central city in a northcentral state. This school district consisted of 37 schools that included 17 elementary schools, three middle schools, three high schools, and 14 charter schools. The district had approximately 16,000 students. Of the 16,000 students, approximately 36% were economically disadvantaged, 10% were English language learners, and 16% were students with disabilities. In addition, approximately 70% were Caucasian, 11% were Hispanic/Latino, 12% were Asian, and 5% were African American ethnicity. The high school participating in this study had a population of about 1,700 students. Of the 1,700 students, approximately 26% were economically disadvantaged, 6% were English language learners, and 13% were students with disabilities.

The participants within this study consisted of eight males on the autism spectrum that attended a daily resource class. The participants ranged in grades 9-12 and were of ages 14-18. All of the participants were native English speakers and received special education services through resource or inclusive settings for their core academic classes.

Procedure

Prior to the study, this researcher collected parental consent for minors in addition to participation assent forms, these forms can be found in Appendices A and B. Students had the

option to opt out of the research participation at any point. To opt out of the study, the student could notify the researcher and the survey forms for that student would not be collected or presented in the final data set. This study was conducted in the second semester of the 2021-2022 school year, with the Self-Directed IEP curriculum instruction taking place over a four-week period. A description of this curriculum is provided in the next section.

The study began with a pre-intervention survey using a four-point Likert scale. In this study the four-point scale was an advantage by eliminating the neutral option, each participant was forced to make a choice in their knowledge (Hartley, 2014). The survey addressed if students knew what an IEP was and continued to get more detailed by asking questions about what is in an IEP and how comfortable they were in their understanding of what was in their own IEP. This survey was developed using the main focus points of an IEP, such as goals, strengths, and accommodations, and the focus areas of the curriculum. These questions were approved upon review from an expert at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and are a valid survey question set using face validity. According to Taherdoost (2016), face validity is the measurement of items that analytically appear to be what is supposed to be measured. Following the survey, students engaged in the Self-Directed IEP curriculum to learn about IEPs and how they can participate in their own meetings. Upon completion of the intervention, students were asked to complete the same survey, using the same four-point Likert scale. A full copy of the survey can be found in Appendix C.

Self-Directed IEP Curriculum

The Self-Directed IEP curriculum was a multi-media package that taught students to feel comfortable participating and directing their own IEP meetings. The curriculum contained 10 instructional lessons that includes two videos explaining the lessons, a teacher's manual and

student workbooks. There were additional assessments that could be used when utilizing the full curriculum program, detailed lesson plans, and a teachers' key to use in correlation to the student workbooks. At the completion of the lessons, there was a video available for students to watch an actor student use the skills that were taught to participate and lead his own IEP meeting.

The curriculum package focused on a model-lead-test instruction process. Each lesson used a similar format in the way the lesson was presented. The format followed: (a) an introduction and review of the previous lesson, (b) an overview of the current lesson, (c) vocabulary that was needed for the day's lesson, (d) a video of the actor student modeling how the skill that was just learned is used in the meeting, (e) a discussion of what happened in the video, (f) guided practice activity to reinforce the lesson which required the student to look at their personal IEP, (g) students evaluated their skills, and (h) wrap up of the lesson where students had to identify other areas where the new learned skill can be used.

Lessons in this package were designed to be taught in six to ten 45-minute lessons. Due to the nature of the resource class, the lessons were taught in 30-minute sessions over the course of four weeks' time. The instructional strategies of this program included leading through instruction, modeling with video examples, role play by students, and discussions. Additional strategies that were offered in the program but were used in this study due to the time, include reading and writing activities.

Data and Analysis

Students completed the survey prior to any instruction on paper. Each survey was collected by this researcher and the data was entered with a given number associated to each student. If a student chose to opt out of the study, the original survey for that student was not included. Data collected was evaluated and analyzed using a table. This was a visual analysis

using two measurements for the same persons, using the same questions. The measurements looked at the trends among students before and after the Self-Directed IEP instruction to compare them. Data from the first survey allowed this researcher to analyze how all students responded to each area and their comfort level. The use of a table made it possible to visualize individual growth from the beginning to the end of the intervention process. According to Cloutier and Ravasi (2020) analyzing data using tables allows the researcher to check for response similarities among research participants. Additionally, the use of tables allowed this researcher to relate the data among all participants and visualize patterns from pre and post intervention.

Chapter 4 Results

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine a relationship of IEP curriculum and student understanding of the IEP process. The research question of study was: Does the use of IEP intervention program, *Self-Directed IEP*, lead to an increased understanding of the IEP process of High School students on the autism spectrum? High school students with autism completed pre and post intervention Likert Scale surveys (Appendix C) that were identical to determine if students' understanding increased with the intervention.

Surveys

The questions included in these surveys targeted main topics within the IEP documents. The remainder of the questions asked about the student's comfortability attending and understanding of the meeting. Pre and post surveys were completed by 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grade male students on the autism spectrum. Information for the development of this survey can be found in chapter 3. Results of the pre and post intervention surveys can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Pre and Post Self-Directed IEP Intervention

	I know what an IEP meeting is.		I understand the purpose of my IEP meetings.		I know who is allowed to attend my IEP meetings.		I know what goals are in my IEP.		I know the progress I am making towards my goals.		I can identify my strengths.		I can identify things I need to get better at.		I know the supports I get that will help me do my best in school.		I understand what testing accommodations I have.		I feel comfortable attending my own IEP meeting.		I am comfortable speaking at my IEP for my needs.		
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	
Student 1	A	SA	D	A	SA	SA	D	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	SD	A	D	A	A	A	D	A
Student 2	A	A	A	A	D	A	SD	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	SD	D	SD	SA	SD	A	SD	D	
Student 3	A	SA	A	SA	A	A	A	A	D	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	SA	SA	SA	A	A	
Student 4	D	SA	D	A	A	A	A	A	SA	A	SA	A	SA	SA	SA	A	A	A	SD	A	D	D	
Student 5	A	A	A	SA	D	A	D	A	D	D	A	A	SA	A	D	A	D	A	SA	SA	A	A	
Student 6	SA	SA	SA	SA	A	SA	A	A	A	A	A	SA	A	A	A	SA	D	A	A	A	A	A	
Student 7	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	SA	A	SA	SA	SA	
Student 8	A	A	A	A	A	A	SA	SA	A	D	D	A	A	A	D	A	D	SA	A	A	D	A	

Note. Student surveys of knowledge were administered pre and post intervention: SD - Strongly Disagree; D - Disagree; A - Agree; SA - Strongly Agree

Student Results

Student 1

Prior to intervention, student one was familiar with the IEP purpose and who could attend his meetings. He was unfamiliar with goals and accommodations. Although the pre survey indicated he did not know his goals, he also indicated that he did know the progress to goals. Post intervention this student was comfortable and understood all major components of the IEP, including speaking at his IEP for his needs.

Student 2

Student two made the most progress over the course of intervention. He understood what and IEP was and the purpose but was unfamiliar and uncomfortable with pieces of the IEP meeting. Results indicate he made a lot of progress, but post intervention still did not feel comfortable to speak at his own meeting. His largest improvements were made in understanding his goals, testing accommodations, and feeling comfortable to attend his own meeting.

Student 3

Student three made minimal progress due to understanding a lot of IEP components prior to intervention as evidenced by his pre intervention survey. His notable improvement areas were knowing the progress he is making toward his goals and fully understanding his testing accommodations. He continued to feel comfortable attending and speaking at his IEP.

Student 4

This student did not know what an IEP was or the purpose prior to the intervention. Pre intervention, this student agreed that he knew all the major components of the IEP and concluded the study with a stronger understanding of those components. Results indicated a large shift from

significantly disagree to agree in being comfortable at his IEP, however results stayed the same that he continues to be uncomfortable speaking at his meeting.

Student 5

Student five also had several improvements to response. Prior to intervention, this student disagreed to knowing or understanding five out of the seven IEP components included in the survey. Post survey, the student still felt he did not understand the progress he was making towards his goals. Although this student had several items he did not understand prior to intervention, pre and post surveys remained the same on comfort to attend and speak at his IEP meetings.

Student 6

Results for student six indicated minimal progress. Agree or strongly agree were selected on the pre survey for 10 out of 11 questions on the pre survey. The notable improvement for this student was not understanding his testing accommodations pre survey to agreeing that he knew them post survey.

Student 7

Results for student seven were very similar to student six. This student made the least progress as he was comfortable and familiar with all parts of the IEP questioned on this survey, prior to any intervention. The only change in responses for this student was the agreement of feeling comfortable attending his own IEP to strongly agreeing.

Student 8

Student eight made improvements in the four areas he disagreed on in the pre survey, including speaking at his own meeting. A major difference from other students was found in question five. Prior to intervention this student agreed to knowing the progress made on his IEP

goals. Post intervention, this student disagreed on the same question. His largest change in response was disagree on understanding his testing accommodations to strongly agreeing to understanding this component.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated that curriculum instruction on self-directed IEPs can increase student understanding of the IEP process. The eight participants' understanding was measured 11 different ways. Initially, the only pre/post regression was a few SA to A for student four. This included consistent instruction three times per week during the participants' resource class, reviewing previous lessons and individual IEP goals, modeling, and time for practicing the skills. Some participant responses changed for the positive while some responses changed what the students thought they understood. While overall students agreed their comfortability increased to participate in their meetings, two students were unchanged in speaking in front of a group on their own behalf. Additionally, all participants agreed post intervention that they were now comfortable to attend their own meetings.

Chapter 5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine how much high school students on the autism spectrum knew and understood of the IEP process, so that an increase in understanding would lead to increased participation. This chapter discusses the results of the participants' surveys and shares recommendations for future studies to increase participation at IEPs for students on the autism spectrum.

The ability to advocate for individual needs is essential for people. While in school, this provides the opportunity for students to speak up for their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs. Outside of school, this allows individuals the chance to communicate about what they need to be successful at a job or when they aren't being treated appropriately by other staff members. By trying to find out how much students in high school on the autism spectrum knew about IEPs, this researcher tried to increase their knowledge in order to increase student attendance and participation in the future at IEP meetings.

It was not unexpected to find that students that had no prior instruction or did not previously attend their IEP meeting, did not understand the language or the components of the IEP. The pre-intervention results were consistent with findings from Martin et al. (2006) that without prior instruction, students did not understand the language of the IEP and did not feel heard at their own meetings. This researcher could speculate that those would be a contributing factor to not attending and not feeling comfortable to speak at their own meetings.

Intervention

The results shared in the previous chapter were consistent with findings from the Martin et al. (2006) study that students within my study were able to identify their interests and areas for

improvement at the completion of the intervention. Additionally, this study was consistent with findings by Woods et al. (2013) that students gained a clearer picture of their goals. While results were consistent with what students could now identify, this study did not include data from IEP meetings post intervention to determine if attendance and participation increased.

Overall, post-survey results indicated an improvement from pre-survey results. The results were as expected in many areas, specifically, students that already attend their IEPs felt comfortable with many areas of the of the IEP indicated within the survey questions. Upon completion of the pre-survey, I observed that student two responded with agree to each question on the survey. I asked the student if that was how he truly felt and he agreed, he felt he knew all of the information and was comfortable with all components of his IEP. This student did not attend his previous IEP that was very recent. I asked specific questions about his IEP that he was unable to answer, like “What are your current supports to help you in school?” and other questions from the survey. Not knowing some of the survey questions verbally, I asked the student to repeat the survey as I asked each question verbally for him to submit a new response. This was done to increase the accuracy of the initial data set. Redoing the survey with this student was important prior to beginning intervention so that results were accurate and measured improvement could be observed. Without redoing the pre survey with this student, the post results would have indicated he had not made much improvement because he responded agree to every survey question.

Unexpected Outcomes

The amount of participation that each student wanted to contribute in terms of discussion was an unexpected outcome in this study. Each lesson and topic area of the IEP included discussion from all students within the classroom. While trying to create a low-stress

environment, students were encouraged to ask questions and other students tried to offer an answer without the help of this researcher. Time was spent with each student for them to understand their goals, strengths, areas of concern, and progress towards their goals. The environment and natural progression of discussions allowed the students to open up more about their individual understandings of the IEP process.

Strengths and Limitations

The survey questions and instruction aligned with the research question of study. Information gathered from the survey correlated directly to what was measured and what was taught within the curriculum. The use of a four-point Likert scale removed the neutral option and made the participants choose a response (Hartley, 2014). In addition, only having four options did not allow for over thinking their response and made the process quick. The program offered multiple methods of engaging the students and real-life scenarios to practice and the use of Likert scales provided a universal method for survey collection of data. Answering these survey questions was easy because the student didn't have to stick with a concrete yes, or no response and the completion of this survey was quick, efficient and inexpensive (Bishop and Herron, 2015).

Limitations to this study included a small population of students to be represented in the data collected. When using a Likert-scale survey, a larger sample size increases the validity of the survey results (Hartley, 2014). Although students had the opportunity to learn exactly what was in each of their IEPs, they learned in front of others which lacked the privacy of their individual information. Additionally, although students were able to practice each skill during lesson periods using the skill during a real IEP was not possible during the time of the study. Not being able to use these skills in a real IEP leaves the skills in the abstract and skills could be

forgotten before the time of their next annual IEP meeting. The limitations of the Likert scale survey included participants might have avoided the extreme responses or could lie to be seen in a more positive light (Bishop and Herron, 2015). These results could impact the study by limiting how much growth has actually occurred individually and overall, as a group.

Implications

Teachers and parents want to know their student will be able and ready to succeed independently when they are done with high school. While intentions are in the right place, there are many opportunities that go unfulfilled to prepare some of our population with the skills needed to live a fully independent life. This action research can help to inform special education teachers, parents and other IEP team members that there are additional ways to teach self-advocacy and self-determination skills. Specific time needs to be set to teach, model, and practice the skills needed to be fully independent. Curricula centered around these skills that have been researched, should be included in part of an annual curriculum with opportunities to practice these skills each year so they are not forgotten.

Further research should be conducted to improve ongoing teaching of this curriculum and improve the quality of the delivery. Additionally, further research should be conducted to determine how early this curriculum should be delivered, whether earlier in the school year or earlier in school years to develop a solid understanding and confidence in the students' advocating skills. When looking to replicate this study, researchers should consider the research of Doronkin et al. (2020) that to increase student participation at IEP meetings, students should be invited and encouraged to attend starting prior to high school to develop the skills that are necessary to have as an adult.

Conclusion

Providing students on the autism spectrum with the Self-Directed IEP curriculum to develop self-determination skills can be effective. According to my results, students on the autism spectrum were able to improve their understanding of the major components of an IEP and feel comfortable attending their meetings. The students that participated in this curriculum are more prepared to attend and speak at their IEP meetings, should they choose to do so.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Impact of IEP Instruction to Increase Participation with High School Students on the Autism Spectrum Consent to Participate in Research

Purpose of the research: Laura Sutton, from the Special Education Autism program at [REDACTED], is conducting a research project on the understanding of the IEP process through the teaching of self-determination skills. By conducting this research, we hope to learn how to increase student participation and attendance at their IEP meetings. You are being asked to allow your student to participate because they are a high school student with an IEP as part of the Autism program and are of age to participate in their annual IEP. This consent form contains important information about this project and what to expect if you decide that your child may participate. Please consider the information carefully. Feel free to ask questions before making your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate.

Procedures: Your student's participation will involve a survey at the beginning and end of the IEP curriculum intervention program. The questions will be answered using a scale with how comfortable they are with the main pieces of the IEP process.

Time Involvement: Your student's participation will take approximately five hours of time, receiving instruction for 30 minutes, three times a week, over the duration of four weeks.

Risks & Benefits: The risks associated with this study are the 10 minutes it will take for your student to complete the survey. The benefits to participation include developing the skills to advocate for their individual needs and knowing how to set goals that will help them be successful in their future. The findings from this project will provide information on how well your student can advocate for their needs and how well they understand and participate in creating their own learning plans.

Privacy & Confidentiality of your Information: The results of this research study may be presented at scientific or professional meetings or published in scientific journals. Your student's individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study. Data collected will only include a pre and post instruction survey. Information will be stored on a password protected computer with students identified only by a number.

Use of your information for future research

Private identifiable information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Payment: Your student will not receive payment for participation in this study.

Right to Withdraw from the Research: Your student's participation in this research is completely voluntary. You have the right to choose for your child not to participate or to withdraw their participation at any time without loss of any service, benefits, or rights you would normally be entitled to. As a parent/guardian, if you decide for your student to not take part in this study, your choice will have no effect on your student's academic status or class grade. If at any time you choose to withdraw your student from the study, you can email or speak directly to the primary investigator, Laura Sutton.

Questions about Research Study:

The person in charge of this study is Laura Sutton of [REDACTED] faculty primary investigators. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw your

student from the study please use the following contact information: Laura Sutton - [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Independent Contact for Reporting Concerns about Research:

If you have any questions, suggestions or concerns about your student's rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Institutional Review Board Office (IRB) at [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Consent:

Your student's participation in this research is voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you have read this form [or the form was read to you] and that all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your student's legal rights as a research participant. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

Parent Signature: I agree to allow my student to participate in this research.

Name of Parent/Guardian

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Appendix B

Impact of IEP Instruction to Increase Participation with High School Students on the Autism Spectrum

Child Assent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to join a research study by Laura Sutton, from the Special Education Autism program at [REDACTED]. This project is to increase what you know about your IEP and help you feel more comfortable with attending and speaking at your own IEP meetings.

If you join the project, you will be asked to complete a survey at the beginning and end of the IEP curriculum that will be taught in your resource class. The lessons will take place three days a week for part of your resource class, over the period of four weeks' time.

If you join, there may be some risks, these include the 10 minutes of time it will take in total to complete the survey before the first lesson and at the end of the last lesson. There may also be some benefits, these will include the ability to speak up for what you need at your own IEP and creating goals that are important to you.

If you do not want to join the project, you can opt out of completing the surveys at the beginning and end of the learning unit.

Any information about you will be kept secure by the researchers by keeping surveys in a locked room and results uploaded to a password protected computer. Your name will be removed from all surveys once the data has been entered to the computer with your name represented with a number.

If you join the study, you will get the skills to speak up for your needs. There will not be a cash payout.

We will provide information to your parents before you decide to join or not join this study. Permission has already been obtained from your parents to participate in this study.

If you have any questions at any time, please call or email Laura Sutton [REDACTED]

You do not have to be in this study. If you do choose to be in the study, you can change your mind at any time by contacting the researcher.

Signing this form means you have read this form and all of your questions have been answered. You and your parents will be given a copy of this form.

I agree to join this study.

Name of Child Participant

Signature of Child Participant

Date

Appendix C

Pre-Intervention IEP Knowledge Survey

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I know what an IEP meeting is.				
2. I understand the purpose of my IEP meetings.				
3. I know who is allowed to attend my IEP meetings.				
4. I know what goals are in my IEP.				
5. I know the progress I am making towards my goals.				
6. I can identify my strengths.				
7. I can identify things I need to get better at.				
8. I know the supports I get that will help me do my best in school				
9. I understand what testing accommodations I have.				
10. I feel comfortable attending my own IEP meeting.				
11. I am comfortable speaking at my IEP for my needs.				