Family Perceptions of Student Centered Planning and IEP Meetings

Amy Childre
Georgia College & State University

Cynthia R. Chambers
University of Kansas

Abstract: Given the documented benefits of family involvement in educational planning, engaging families throughout the school years is strongly advocated. However, barriers continue to impede families from collaborative partnering in educational planning. In this qualitative study the perceptions of six families were examined prior to and after the implementation of a student centered individualized education program (IEP) planning tool. Findings revealed barriers within traditional planning that relegate families to passive roles and a family preference for the student centered approach to IEP planning. The student centered approach resulted in increased family satisfaction, more collaborative participation by all IEP team members, and broader consideration of family and student input with respect to future desired outcomes as a basis for goal development.

Current law and professional literature advocate family involvement in education as a best practice. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 and the 2004 reauthorization promote family involvement by requiring the consideration of parental concerns and information in individualized education program (IEP) development and consideration of student preferences in transition planning. Documented positive outcomes for both student and family as a result of family participation include improved transition outcomes (Greenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001; Masino & Hodapp, 1996) and development of parent and student advocacy skills (Alper, Schloss, & Schloss, 1996; Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson, & Stillerman, 2002). Involving families in educational planning is a critical variable to both school and post school success. Despite the importance of family involvement, barriers exist that limit family engagement in educational planning (i.e., lack of understanding of the planning process, limited involvement options, terminology/language barriers) (Greenen et al., 2001). Furthermore, although consideration of family and student preferences is key to meaningful outcomes, discussing these issues with families is not typical practice (DeFur, Todd-Allen, & Getzel, 2001; Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001). Given these barriers, it is not surprising that family involvement decreases and family apathy toward educational planning increases as students age (Greenen et al., 2001; Morningstar, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 1996).

Barriers limiting family involvement place the locus of control in educational planning firmly with professionals. This disparity of control and failure to consider student and family preferences leads to inadequate educational planning. Too often IEP documents do not articulate skills that will assist a student in achieving success in environments outside of a limited educational environment (Stowitschek & Kelso, 1989) or skills that will improve the quality of life for a student (Giangreco, Edelman, Dennis, & Cloninger, 1995). Giangreco and colleagues (1994) note that because of the current status of educational planning, student achievement on goals and objectives is not an adequate indicator of success of an educational program. Current educational planning falls short in areas of relevance, quality, and preparedness (Grigal, Test, Beattie, & Wood, 1997; Stowitschek & Kelso, 1989).
Regularly educational planning fails to build a vision for the student’s current and future life on which to base goals and objectives. It is no wonder with the current approach the field takes toward planning that the end results of special education are diminutive. Statistics depict substantial gaps between young adults with disabilities and their peers without disabilities across a range of areas of adult independence (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

Given that family involvement in education planning is far from the desired level, a high priority for the field is to research and identify innovative approaches that practitioners will utilize to involve families and students in the educational planning process. The literature resounds with calls for implementation of person centered planning to enhance family participation and educational planning outcomes (Flannery et al., 2000; Miner & Bates, 1997; Morningstar et al., 1996; Whitney-Thomas & Hanley-Maxwell, 1996). Person centered planning is seen as a tool that could increase family involvement, shift the locus of decision making control, increase student awareness and advocacy, and focus educational planning on preparation for post school settings. Person centered planning is not seen as a one step solution to all of the problems in educational planning, but as the beginning step on the ladder to reaching successful planning with positive outcomes (Miner & Bates, 1997).

In view of these issues, a different person centered planning tool was developed for this current research study by combining aspects of person centered tools such as Personal Futures Planning (PFP) (Mount & Zwernik, 1989) and Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH) (Pearpoint, O’Brien, & Forest, 1995) as well as a student IEP involvement approach, IPLAN materials (Van Reusen & Bos, 1990 1994). This approach, referred to as Student Centered Individualized Education Planning (SCIEP), was developed by the first author to be used within an IEP meeting to address legal requirements while incorporating person centered techniques. The purpose of this inquiry was to examine the impact SCIEP would have on family and professional perceptions of planning. Thus, the specific research questions for the current study were (a) What are family perceptions of the purpose of IEP meetings and of participation for themselves and their children in educational planning prior to the implementation of the SCIEP approach? (b) How does the use of the SCIEP planning process affect family perception of and participation for themselves and their children in educational planning? (c) Considering factors important to professionals (e.g., ease of use, costs vs. bene-
fits), what are professional and family perceptions of SCIEP as a tool for IEP planning?

Method

Qualitative methodology is the most appropriate means of researching and discovering realities for families of students with disabilities for two reasons: the process yields rich, descriptive data and the approach presents the families’ perspectives more fully (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In this study qualitative methods were employed to gather information about family perceptions of educational planning before and after using a student centered planning approach in IEP meetings. Qualitative elements utilized included purposive sampling of families, inductive analysis of data, development of grounded theory based on the data, and a continually emergent design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Attitude was viewed as a critical factor in whether families would use a student centered process and when used, if it would change their participation in planning. Identifying these underlying issues that affect family involvement could be more easily addressed through in-depth, open-ended interviews. Analysis of the categories arising from the interviews generated answers to the research questions.

Participants

Purposeful sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used to select families of students with disabilities who served as primary participants for the study. The target group included families of students who receive services for orthopedic disabilities and/or moderate intellectual disabilities in a rural southeastern school system. All of the students either attended or were transitioning in or out of a middle school. The middle school was one of two in the district and served approximately 530 students between grades 6 and 8. Approximately 54% of the school’s population were African American, 42% Caucasian, and 4% other ethnicities. Approximately 65% of students in this system were eligible for free or reduced price meals. Families were selected to reflect the racial balance, family structure, and range of student disability present in the school. All families who were contacted about participation agreed to participate in the study. Ethnicity of families consisted of African American \( (n = 3) \) and Caucasian \( (n = 3) \). Sampling included families of diverse structure: 2 blended families with siblings and siblings from previous marriages, 1 nuclear family with siblings, 1 nuclear family with no siblings, 1 family with a single mother, and 1 family with a non-traditional head of household. Of these families only 1 father and mother jointly chose to participate in the study. For the remaining 5 families, the mother \( (n = 4) \) or grandmother \( (n = 1) \) chose to participate. The children of these families represented a wide range of intellectual and communication abilities, which allowed insight into child participation with students of varying abilities. See Table 1 for detailed information on the participating families and students.

The special education teacher for each student at the middle school level served as the facilitator of the SCIEP process in each IEP meeting. One of these two teachers was also the first author. Teachers as opposed to outside facilitators were used to more closely emulate the typical arrangement in IEP meetings and to assess the feasibility of the process for teachers. In addition to the families and facilitators, the study included team members from the IEP meetings as participants (i.e., physical therapist, an occupational therapist, and an elementary special education teacher).

Procedure

The SCIEP process integrated person centered techniques within written forms that addressed information required on IEPs. The process included family forms, student forms, and meeting forms to generate input from all team members. For a description of the forms, see Table 2. Family forms were provided to families prior to the IEP meeting. Families were encouraged to complete these forms as a family, including the student in generating information. Student forms were completed by the student with the support of the facilitating teacher. Students were informed that they would use the forms in the upcoming IEP meeting to help give the planning team ideas about their next school year. The meeting forms were completed with the cooperation of team members during the IEP meeting.
steps were designed to help professionals and families educate one another about the student and the information could be used to gain understanding about where goals should be focused.

The facilitating teachers used a written protocol as a guide to ensure that SCIEP forms were used consistently across the meetings. This written protocol included information on how each step would relate to generating the IEP and also served to guide facilitating teachers as they used the completed forms to write the IEP. Training of the second facilitating teacher occurred in three stages. The first stage involved discussing the purpose of using a student centered plan, the information that could be generated from its use, and the benefits of involving families in educational planning. The second stage covered the written protocol and the SCIEP forms providing explanations on how to follow the protocol and how to use it to assist in implementing the SCIEP forms. A third training was offered including role play of a sample IEP meeting using the SCIEP process following a pilot run of a SCIEP meeting.

To implement SCIEP, families were contacted by phone to determine a date and time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Family Structure</th>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Eligibility</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Millie King</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Grandparents, grandchild</td>
<td>Derrell</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Moderate Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>Non-verbal, vocal, communicates through gestures and AAC; enjoys company of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray and Ginny Ross</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Nuclear family, children</td>
<td>Lyndi</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Moderate Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>Verbal; reading 1st level; happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona Baxter</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Single mother, children</td>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment</td>
<td>Severe physical and speech impairments; shy; uses wheelchair; moderate intellectual disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blanche White</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Nuclear family, child</td>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment</td>
<td>Verbal; friendly; non-literate; moderate physical impairments; uses wheelchair; moderate intellectual disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie Moore</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Blended family, children and stepchildren</td>
<td>Vonica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment</td>
<td>Strong social, verbal, &amp; independence skills; reading 1st level; walker for ambulation; mild/moderate intellectual disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam Lewis</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Blended family, children and stepchildren</td>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Orthopedic Impairment</td>
<td>Age appropriate verbal &amp; social skills; reading 4th level; crutch for ambulation; learning disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for the IEP meeting. Five of the meetings were conducted at the school; and one meeting was conducted at a family’s home. All meetings occurred during regular school hours. In addition to the legally required participants, each family chose additional participants to include in their child’s IEP meeting. Prior to the meetings families completed the family forms at home and facilitating teachers assisted students with completing the student forms. During the IEP meetings, facilitating teachers completed the meeting forms by requesting information from all participants including the information listed on the student and family forms. Meetings lasted approximately 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours.

Preinterviews (i.e., prior to the SCiEP meeting) and postinterviews (i.e., following the SCiEP meeting) were arranged with each family at their convenience and at a place of mutual agreement. All of the families requested interviews at their homes with the exception of one family that requested the interview be conducted at school. All but one preinterview took place less than 1 week prior to each student’s IEP meeting. One preinterview occurred 18 days prior to the meeting because the family rescheduled the IEP meeting for a later than expected date. All but one postinterview took place within 1 month of the IEP meeting with the additional postinterview occurring 7 weeks after the meeting because of scheduling difficulties due to student surgery. Each semi-structured interview was conducted in approximately 1 hour. All interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis.

The first author served as the interviewer in each interview. The interview protocol was developed by reviewing literature on family involvement in educational planning. Researchers (n = 2) who had expertise with families and qualitative research reviewed and assisted in finalizing the interview protocol. This protocol served as a guide to assure that relevant questions were addressed. The interviewer followed the lead of the family members prompting spontaneous follow-up questions keeping the interviews informal and comfortable. Issues addressed in the preinterviews included family perceptions of IEP meeting purpose; family roles in the meetings; family satisfaction with current family and student involvement level; whether school planning meets current family and student educational needs;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2</th>
<th>Description of SCiEP Forms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Forms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Circle</td>
<td>Provides an opportunity for the family to share important relationships in the child’s life particularly outside of the school environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreams</td>
<td>Encourages the family to share dreams for their child at the present and for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Allows the family to express preferences and ideas for student goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths and Preferences</td>
<td>Encourages students to consider and express their preferences in learning environments and their strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals and Dreams</td>
<td>Asks students to share goals and dreams for high school and post school settings and to consider skills needed to reach goals and dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Forms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Survey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Circle</td>
<td>Extends family relationship circle and considers balance of relationships in student’s life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td>Asks family to share places the family frequents as a basis for developing community based curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Works</td>
<td>Develops an ability focused present level of functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreams</td>
<td>Documents techniques that promote student success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>Communicates student and family dreams for now and the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who &amp; When</td>
<td>Generates IEP goals by integrating information from previous steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Forms</td>
<td>Identifies each team member’s responsibilities and when responsibilities will be accomplished</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
impact of planning and education; and how educators might better serve families in IEP planning. Postinterview questions focused on the following issues: family and student roles within SCIEP; impact of the process on professional and family interactions; family feelings about discussing future dreams; and positive and negative aspects of SCIEP.

After each of the IEP meetings, the first author met with professionals who participated in the SCIEP meetings including the other facilitating teacher, elementary special education teacher, physical therapist, and occupational therapist. Discussion information included ideas for SCIEP future use, effort in implementing the process, and perception of success of using the forms with the families. Detailed notes made following each discussion were used as collateral data to family postinterviews.

Data Analysis

The audiotapes of the pre- and post-family interviews were transcribed verbatim by an outside professional and were verified by the researcher. All preinterviews and postinterviews were analyzed separately using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This method was used to construct categories and themes case by case to find common and idiosyncratic patterns from the interview data and to ensure rigor. The first step in analysis involved reviewing transcripts for recurring themes, insightful comments, and salient ideas. No predetermined categories were used and each interview was coded separately. Then categories across preinterviews were combined and compared repeatedly until category sets were well defined. This analysis process was repeated for all postinterviews.

After analysis of family interviews was complete and themes were fully developed, notes from the discussions with other participants were analyzed for positive and negative occurrences with family interview themes. Comments and ideas from other participants were added to appropriate family themes to further substantiate categories. Several themes arose from these discussions that were not evident in family interviews related to changes in or for future use of SCIEP. Since this information was deemed crucial to professionals’ use of SCIEP, categories were added to family data and thoroughly documented as to the source. Family interviews were viewed as the primary data in the study. All other data collected were used either to establish credibility or as an external check on the inquiry process. Credibility was established through triangulating family interview data with data from discussions with other participants, completed SCIEP forms, and IEP documents. External checks on the findings were performed through use of analysis of personal notes, peer debriefing, and member checks.

Results

Findings are discussed according to the three research questions: (a) family perceptions of traditional IEP planning, (b) family perceptions of student centered IEP planning, and (c) implementation and future use of student centered IEP planning.

Family Perceptions of Traditional IEP Planning

Data collected in preinterviews reflected family perceptions developed over time through repeated interactions in educational planning. Categories arising from the data addressed (a) meeting purpose and dynamics, (b) student involvement, and (c) limitations of planning.

Meeting Purpose and Dynamics

Listening to receive information about their child’s education was a primary means of participation in IEP meetings for all families and a primary role for 5 of the 6 families was to agree with the IEP. The general consensus of how families viewed their participation was illustrated in these families’ statements: “I listen more than I say anything. I guess I am just always satisfied with the input of everybody else” (White). Certainly listening was not the only role families played, but it was the most emphasized and repeated. When families discussed instances of more active planning (e.g., requesting change of placement, sharing medical information), it involved a low level of collaboration, brainstorming, and problem solving among team members. “Well, I usually
listen and if I feel like I do not understand something, I ask a question” (Moore). When families and professionals worked together, the result was more consistent with an exchange of information rather than an in-depth cooperative effort.

Two families shared their satisfaction with the teacher primarily planning the program and they, the family, having little input. “Ever since she has been at the elementary school, I have always been satisfied with the things that the teacher set up for her” (Moore). “The teacher suggests because. . .Zach went to her for six years and she knew probably more about him than I did” (Lewis). While these quotes highlight a trust for teachers, they indicate a failure of teams to share critical information and consider all relevant factors in planning an educational program.

Families did not consider the lack of professional and family sharing a shortcoming of planning; their experience with planning had shaped them to regard meeting as a means of determining services and annual goals wherein the focus was on the school environment and short-term planning. Without family input or families guiding planning, professional planning focused on school and lacked insight into the student’s home or community life. Therefore, planning had no basis for generating a broader base of goals targeting skills that could assist the students in environments beyond school.

Throughout the preinterviews, families discussed information that illustrated their wealth of information regarding student needs and functioning. Although families felt they had given information to professionals, it was clearly evident that families had shared only a minute portion of their knowledge concerning their children. Traditional IEP planning did not begin to touch on the information that these families could potentially share.

**Student Involvement**

Student participation in meetings was widely variable ranging from voicing goal preferences to not attending. The level of participation for each individual student was dependent on family and professional expectations for participation as well as student communication and cognitive abilities. Five of the six families were satisfied with their children’s current involvement in educational planning. Families expressed hope to see participation increase with age and for the students to become more actively involved in decision making about their future. The only family that did not express these expectations for increasing input felt that the student could not be expected to provide input due to level of communication and cognitive functioning. Families hoped their children would become independent decision makers, but acknowledged the time required for some to master this skill. Families recognized potential benefits of students increasing their awareness and reasoning in planning. Even with expectations for increasing student participation, half of the families expressed concern about maintaining control over final decisions. Families openly discussed their feelings. “Maybe a little later on down the line we could let her have more input. Right now we do not want to lose what she has accomplished” (Baxter). “Well not anything wild that she may want to do. If I do not feel like it is right, then I do not want her to do it” (Moore). “I will probably let him choose, if it is the right thing” (Lewis). Families felt that due to student age, immaturity, or cognitive ability adults should oversee student decisions to make certain the choices are in the best interest of the student. Clearly families have hopes for their children to become more active in making decisions related to education and life goals, but approach this with some apprehension.

**Limitations of Planning**

Several themes arose as families discussed difficulties they had encountered in educational planning: noncollaborative actions, failure to understand family perspective, service provision problems, and networking breakdowns.

**Noncollaborative actions.** Half of the families had experienced pressure to agree with a preset agenda for placement or goals. One particular parent was pushed to accept a special school placement even though she felt the evaluation was not valid. “I was given the impression that I should go along with the Academy for the Blind [evaluation and special school placement] when they said that she was
legally blind and saw very little” (White). Another family discussed how professionals convey a preset agenda and how this serves to hinder family participation.

...I felt like a lot of times they pretty well had the agenda set before we got there...The few things we would mention, it was like, “Well that is great”, then they would go back into the set agenda. It just kind of seemed like it was kind of a cut and dry thing basically before we got there (Ross).

The parent continued, “When they already have the goals set, it is just like the parents just have to agree to whatever they [professionals] have on the papers that are already written up...We are just there to put our signature on the paper” (Ross). Failure to move beyond a preset agenda conveys that meetings are merely a legal obligation of schools.

Not considering or requesting family suggestions is an additional way that schools fail to support families. Two families discussed instances in planning where professionals dismissed information families offered placing families on the defensive. “My ideas were not accepted, were valueless” (Ross). Families emphasized the importance of professionals offering and explaining options rather than forcing their opinions and approaches. One parent discussed what he hoped for: “Rather than leave there saying, ‘Well I lost and they won’ or ‘They won and I lost,’ try to work more for a win/win thing” (Ross). Even when professionals and families differ in opinion, families often desire compromise and do not seek an adversarial position.

Another way educators alienate families in planning is through the use of educational and medical terminology or jargon. Families shared situations wherein team members had used terminology that they did not understand. Interestingly, families did not feel it was the educator’s responsibility to put the information in more comprehensible terms even when the team was discussing an evaluation or placement. These families felt it was their responsibility to understand the information as the educators presented it.

It is the terminology that they carried on between themselves that really I did not understand. I can not really put any fault on anybody there because I did not understand the terminology that they were using at the IEP (White).

Two of the families who did not note educational jargon as a problem discussed gaining an understanding of information through initiating questions and discussion. Over time, they had used meetings to educate themselves about terminology, how to give input, and the IEP process.

Failure to understand family perspective. Three families discussed how professionals need to be sensitive to family feelings especially when expressing low expectations for a student. One family explained the need for professional sensitivity when families are adjusting to the possibility of special education placement.

When as a parent you have a child and you are told that your child has to be in special education...this is kind of a hard thing to accept. I think that they [professionals] might need to be a little bit more understanding of parents’ feelings (Ross).

Families discussed their efforts to support their children’s progress as professionals focused on limitations or even predicted institutionalization. Families discussed how negative expectations alienate families from planning destroying family-professional trust, but more importantly how these statements, can inflict wounds that families must struggle to overcome emotionally.

Problems with service provision. Families discussed displeasure with various services; each of the difficulties centered on a failure of the professionals to communicate with families. Specific instances recounted by families included occurrences wherein professionals failed to provide details on services and placement so that the family would have knowledge of environments in which the student was being educated and what each professional’s role would be in the process. As one family shared, “The first year Zach went to that school...I did not realize what the special education teacher was and what the kindergarten teacher was” (Lewis). This parent discussed her discomfort with the school setting at IEP meetings as well as other school activities. “Well the people there were not very
friendly. Nobody ever talked to you except the special education teacher. That is really the only person at the school I knew. I just did not feel comfortable going” (Lewis). Failure of regular education teachers to initiate contact with her made her uncomfortable in the school setting. “As far as every teacher he has ever had besides the special education teacher, I never communicated with them. They never communicated with me” (Lewis).

For a student who received half-day regular classes with few modifications, this lack of communication was not in the best interest of the student.

Other instances shared related professional failure to communicate lack of student progress to families and failure to offer or provide adequate services to meet the student’s needs. Mrs. King described an incident of failure of a speech therapist to communicate important information to a family in a timely manner. “She [speech therapist] did not feel like she accomplished anything. So if she had told me that in the beginning, she could have gotten somebody else to try to teach him because she was not doing it” (King). In this case, the lack of progress was conveyed several years after services were implemented.

Lack of networking between classrooms, schools and agencies. Lastly, families had incurred difficulty with the continuity between school programs (i.e., elementary to middle) and continuity between schools and outside agencies providing information and services for school age children. One family shared a desire for consistency in teaching approaches and programs.

It seems like every time we transfer from one school. . .each of them seemed to have a different way of wanting to educate her rather than continuing with what. . .seemed to work and building on that. It was kind of like getting halfway through the house and deciding we do not like this plan. Let’s abandon it, tear down what we have done, and start again with a whole different plan. . .It was difficult to convince them to continue with what we were doing and build on it rather than switch over to a whole new agenda and method of teaching her (Ross).

Another family expressed frustration with the school system and service agencies as she pursued information on vocational training options and alternative living situations. No one provided her with the information or assistance she requested, which left her feeling she had no where to turn. “There is nothing else I can do. I have done it. I am just about exhausted” (King). These cases highlighted a failure of schools to provide continuity in programs and to supply families with supportive information.

In the preinterviews families discussed an array of incidents or practices of educators that interfered with their involvement in planning or hindered them from pursuing dreams for their children. Before using SCIEP, families primarily assumed or were impelled into passive roles in determining their children’s educational goals and program. Families saw themselves as participating in meetings, but their discussion revealed they primarily listened and answered questions. Problems families encountered were lack of support for what families wanted, lack of understanding for what families were experiencing, and lack of communication between schools and agencies to build successful transitions. These results evidenced a need for an approach to support an educational partnership between families and professionals.

Family Perceptions of Student Centered IEP Planning

Data collected in postinterviews addressed family perceptions of the SCIEP planning and was categorized into the areas of (a) meeting purpose, (b) meeting dynamics, (c) process structure, and (d) student involvement.

Meeting Purpose

One purpose of the SCIEP meeting families identified was planning for the future. All six of the families discussed how the process facilitated opening families up to considering the future, developing plans for the future, and using the plans as a basis for programming today. The discussion generated from using the forms placed focus on not only determining goals and services, but on choosing goals and pursuing services that would assist them in reaching future dreams. The discus-
sion triggered some families to think about aspects of their children’s futures that they had not considered before. For Ms. Baxter this meant seeing options for her child that she thought were not possible.

It kind of keyed in on what it is that you want her to be able to do in the future... to tune in that she will be able to do something instead of just being homebound where somebody comes in here and feeds her and clothes her (Baxter).

This was the first time that families had discussed this information in an IEP meeting. By sharing dreams, the families began to consider the future and to identify goals to target today that could assist with achieving future dreams. Plans for the future varied from family to family—alternative living placement, companionship, work, and higher education. One family noted the shift to the future. “We [the family] have discussed it before; we just never have narrowed it down to reality” (White). All families felt discussing the future was a positive change because informing professionals established a support team to facilitate achieving dreams. As one family put it, “…For everybody to visualize this dream, a goal, for Alexandra, I think it is a good thing because I am sure that could be a part in helping to make this dream come true” (Ross).

Professionals involved in the meetings echoed the families’ view that consideration of the future sparked a more purposeful dialogue. Through this, a realistic vision of the student’s future generated a new perspective that helped professionals know how to guide the family.

A second purpose of the SCIEP meeting families identified was developing a holistic view of the student. Five of the families discussed how the process revealed more extensive information in the areas of home, community, and school than in prior meetings, which provided a broader picture of student functioning. One family emphasized the importance of professionals understanding student functioning in environments outside school. “You can open up and tell the things that you do with him because I do not just shelter him. ...” (King). Another family member discussed how the forms gave a more accurate picture of the student from which the team could develop an educational program. She discussed the contrast of the traditional deficit focused meeting information with the ability profile generated with SCIEP. This parent voiced the importance and desire of families to hear ability focused information as a means of promoting professional-family collaboration and effective planning for the student. Professionals confirmed that SCIEP gave a broader view and ability focus in student functioning and noted the insight it provided in developing and implementing programs.

Meeting Dynamics

Families shared how the SCIEP process shifted meeting dynamics from general conversation to in depth communication about specific issues, which supported more active and open interaction than in previous meetings. The process encouraged communication, brainstorming, and problem solving between families and professionals. These meetings were characterized by their shift from simple exchange of information between team members toward true collaboration. “Everybody, each one, put in their input and discussed it to the fullest” (White). Some families offered ideas about goals in areas that had not been targeted before, their input cued by the prompts written in the SCIEP forms. “I knew what to ask, what I needed to know” (White). Other families identified the primary difference in this meeting as an increased level of communication. “It did not change my input any. It just gave me more input. ...” (King).

This increased communication supported an overall elevated level of family participation. Beyond prompting input, the SCIEP process facilitated collaborating by promoting an open and nonjudgmental atmosphere that was conducive to families sharing input. As evident from interactions at the meetings and from comments in the postinterviews, families actually enjoyed the meetings: “...it was just a good meeting” (King), “…I really enjoyed it...” (White), and “I thought it went different, one of the most enjoyable ones I have been to before” (Lewis). In confirmation of this positive experience, all families stated they preferred SCIEP to typical IEP planning. Mrs. White discussed her preference, “To me
it was a lot better IEP meeting than I have ever been to. It was all discussing important things that I enjoyed finding out about, some things I did not know" (White). The process made the families more comfortable and at ease than at previous IEP meetings. Mrs. White discussed this change. “I felt like everybody just jumped in and did their part rather than the other meetings—zip, zip, zip—I did not know where I was at when I left” (White). Another parent echoed similar feelings, “I was more comfortable. Usually when I did go to those meetings [past IEP meetings at school], I think what was mainly on my mind was getting out of there” (Lewis). Comfort level appeared to have an immense effect on family participation in team discussions.

Collaboration benefits were not limited to families, but extended to professionals. Professionals felt using the forms encouraged collaboration not only between professionals and families, but among professionals as well. As one professional shared, “Other IEP meetings are so discipline defined. Each discipline has their lines to talk through. With these forms the family is able to ask, ‘Can you help us with this?’” The format encouraged team efforts to address student needs by placing issues before the team so that all members could contribute their expertise in a collaborative effort. With this approach, addressing goals was “not territorial.”

Another positive aspect of the meeting articulated by families was that professionals and families gained useful information from one another. Families learned what to expect in the upcoming year, goals for the families to work on at home, details about the student’s program, what skills the student was working on at school, information about alternative and augmentative communication devices, and how to teach the student while out in the community. “I understood it a little bit more...of what Vonica was going to be doing for the next year. I was real pleased with what I heard” (Moore). Ms. Baxter shared further details about the information she gained. “I liked that [SCIEP] because it helped me out taking her into the community too. You [the teacher] are teaching her stuff like counting money...which I never did think of doing.”

Professionals learned more about the student’s relationships and friendships at home, skills or behaviors of the student at home, and how and where the student functions in the community with the family. Families provided the team with a clear picture of the students’ lives outside of school, how the students function with their families, to an extent that had never been discussed in previous meetings. As Ms. Baxter noted, “I feel like that now we both have some understanding there on each end. I understood more about what is going on in school and you as her teacher understood more about what is going on at home.”

One professional offered an explanation of how the process made such a difference in the knowledge shared and learned. The format of the meeting supported receptivity of families and professionals and created an open atmosphere for families to express ideas and concerns. Families were then more open to accepting and often better able to understand opinions and suggestions of other members. In turn, families also offered information that team members welcomed with open minds.

**Process Structure**

Families identified the structure of SCIEP as a strong factor in supporting family participation. All families felt that both family and meeting forms increased their participation and guided them to discuss issues they typically would not have shared. In the words of one family, “All of this, it is different, but it is to the point. This is the first meeting that these items and statements have been made where you can have input in it” (King). Another family shared how the process served to prompt input. “As you go to each step of the meeting...you begin to generate ideas rather than just as we have in the past with general conversation” (Ross). Professionals and families agreed that the family forms served to prepare families for their role in the meeting. One family (Ross) discussed the contributions of the forms.

It is good before the meetings to stimulate thought.... Most of the time...you really just have not taken the time to think about what it is that you feel that you need to discuss with the teacher or some of the things that you feel like we need to begin to work with her on.
Family participation is often stifled because families feel as outsiders rather than as team members. Ms. Baxter emphasized this point, “I think a parent being in the meetings is just like a visitor.” In addition, she shared how SCIEP drew her in as a contributing team member. “With your questions [on the forms] you are digging up more and more and more...[Without the forms] The parent may not think it is important and they kind of withhold some information.” As with Ms. Baxter, families often withhold questions or input out of concern that they are unimportant. The process supported families to overcome this obstacle to participation by creating a situation that prompted families to share. Other families acknowledged this point, “Rather than the other meetings I had been to, I knew what to ask, what I needed to know” (White). Professionals attributed this shift in family participation to changing from a “Here it is. Will you sign?” approach to a “Families are the meeting” approach. Professionals discussed how the process allowed the families to dictate the meeting in an indirect way by giving families a clear purpose and role to fulfill resulting in immense change in participation.

The process supported family-professional relationships that encouraged family communication across time. “It just made a good relationship between the teacher and physical therapist and occupational therapist. I feel more comfortable that I can come to you” (White). Professionals noted that the process educated families about each professional’s role while opening lines of communication. Related service professionals shared that establishing a relationship where families recognized them as resources was a highly positive outcome.

In addition to supporting family participation, families and professionals discussed how the SCIEP process provided structure, focus, and clarity to the meetings. Mrs. King stated, “...it is more clear” (King). Families were pleased with the meeting because the discussion stayed focused and all issues were thoroughly covered. One family explained, “It keeps you on target so you do not get off track and discuss something else. It structures the meetings, keeps you focused. I like that” (Ross). Furthermore, the structure and focus of the meeting led to more clarity. Families left the meetings with a better understanding of the information covered. As Mrs. Moore explained, “I understood it a little bit more”.

One of the features contributing to meeting clarity was design of the forms. Five of the families mentioned that the new forms were easier to read and understand than the legally required IEP forms because the SCIEP forms were “...just like a little diary” (Baxter). As one family revealed, more immediate value was placed on the SCIEP information, “I was able to read and understand them better. I actually read that whole thing [student centered forms]. Usually I just stick them [legal IEP forms] on my dresser. I do not even look at them” (Lewis).

Student Involvement

In preinterviews families had little to say about the students’ prior participation. Primarily the families hoped that their children would become more active in participation in the future. After implementing the SCIEP process, the postinterviews showed how the new approach had begun to transform families’ consideration of the students’ involvement. Due to the range of student cognitive and communication abilities, student involvement varied widely across the meetings. In 2 of the 6 meetings, student participation was active in that students shared information about strengths and future desires. In the remaining 4 meetings, students had more passive participation. Three of the students gave professionals information related to goals and dreams that the facilitating teacher shared in the meeting for the student. For the remaining student whose communication was limited, the team used knowledge of student preferences to discuss student desires.

Student participation, regardless of whether participation was active or passive, resulted in a range of family comments focusing on effects it had on the family. Four of the 6 families discussed benefits for both themselves and their children as a result of the student input into planning for the future. Families noted how consideration of their child’s perspective and interests gave them new insight into their child’s goals and dreams. Families viewed this process not only as a means of enlightening them, but also as a way for their children to
develop skills that would shape their future. “At least she has goals for herself. She just does not want to do nothing” (Moore). She continued, “She is going to have to learn to express her own feelings someday. She might as well start now” (Moore). For the Moore family, the process prompted Vonica to share her dreams in detail that she had not shared with her family prior. “It gave me an understanding of where she wanted to go.” (Moore).

In some meetings, discussion of student dreams prompted the team to consider student abilities and interests while also considering skills, competencies, and resources required for achieving that dream. For one family this meant determining what aspects of a dream profession intrigued the student so that the team could generate realistic alternatives.

I think she has a few real, real high dreams [veterinarian], but bringing it on down is she likes to work with animals. We did discuss this. She probably would be real good with taking care of pets and looking after them (Ross).

Opening up the future encouraged some families to delve into issues they were putting off and to discuss ideas they had been hesitant to voice.

For some families the process was a catalyst for the family to reconsider expectations for student responsibilities not only in educational planning, but home environments. The Ross family considered ways to increase their daughter’s involvement. “I would like for her to be more involved than she is.” They continued, “...rather than just accepting okay, we need to keep asking more questions and keep probing until we get her to open up a little bit more on these things [educational planning, dreams, future]” (Ross). This family discussed how planning prompted their recognition of the importance of increasing expectations and responsibilities at home to support their child’s development of skills needed for future functioning and success.

Families felt the student’s presence in the meeting informed the students of adult expectations for them. Students were participants as professionals and families discussed expectations related to daily functioning, behavior, and academics. “I thought it was good for him to put his input in too and to listen to what he needs to do and what we expect out of him next year” (Lewis). These families expected the act of students listening to and participating in goal development would motivate them to be more productive in achieving goals. Mrs. White articulated this expectation: “I think she realized that we expected a little more of her than what she is doing and we know she can do it...I think she will do a lot better in the next year.”

At the time of postinterviews, the new planning process had an obvious short term effect on two students. Both Mrs. White and Mrs. Lewis mentioned behaviors or requests their children had made since the meeting that were relevant to goals discussed in the meetings. Erin had begun to independently engage in drawing as a leisure activity and Zach had repeatedly requested his family to drill his multiplication facts. Participating as team members seemed to make goals more relevant for students and motivate them toward achievement.

Implementation and Future Use of Student Centered IEP Planning

Postinterview data addressing the feasibility of using student centered planning was categorized into two specific areas: (a) process shortfall and (b) recommendations for future use.

Process Shortfall

Four families acknowledged that a limitation of the process was that it did not completely alleviate family fear and worries at times of transition. Mrs. Moore spoke of her concerns about Vonica moving to the middle school in the fall. “Nothing will make me feel easier about it. I still do not know how the year is going to be for her.” Although the general consensus of the families was that SCIEP could not eliminate stress from transitions, 3 families felt that use of the process would give them more information about transition environments, which might help ease the process or better prepare them for the move.
Recommendations for Future Use

Families and professionals offered suggestions for adapting and utilizing the process in the future. As expected, professionals sought means of reducing the time commitment of the process. Professionals who had engaged in more than one SCIEP meeting felt that as professionals become more familiar with the process the time commitment may be reduced by half. For related services professionals with large caseloads, one professional suggested a modified approach to participation. For maximum efficiency while still supporting all students served, professionals could read over form summaries, but also be present for portions of the meeting for which they would have the most input and impact (i.e., Now, Goals, and Dreams). Although four of the families described the meeting as a bit longer, they stated they were glad to put in the extra time to help their children and they did not request a time reduction. One family expressed the desire for additional planning time, but recognized that this would be difficult for professionals to schedule. This family added that the information covered was more important than the length of the meeting.

All families and professionals, except one professional, recommended annual use of the forms. Families felt for the students to reap the maximum benefit the tool should be used annually. The professional who differed in opinion suggested development of an interim summary form to be used annually with the full process being used every third year.

After using the process once, both facilitating teachers developed ease with implementing the process that spawned ideas for individualizing the process for later use. Professionals felt the forms would be most beneficial to facilitating teachers if they were able to adapt the process to fit their personal style and/or the needs of a specific family, student, or situation. Facilitating teachers found that some families would have benefited from an alternative option for completing the family forms. Although family forms enhanced the information used in developing goals and planning a student’s program, the process was still effective with the families that did not complete the forms.

In reflecting upon student participation, one professional considered the current student forms too vague recommending expansion to offer more choices or categories to support student completion. Augmenting the student forms in this manner would inform the students of the range of possibilities available while encouraging more active involvement. Maximal student involvement occurred with students with higher cognitive and communication abilities. This prompted professionals to express the opinion that the process would work well with students with mild disabilities who would be more actively involved in the planning process.

Discussion

In summary, these findings represent positive changes across both student and family participation with the use of SCIEP in educational planning and illuminate the potential that exists for engaging families as collaborative members on educational teams. Findings revealed in preinterviews depicted families who primarily listened in meetings and students who were minimally involved, but families who were generally satisfied with planning. The postinterviews revealed families who saw themselves, their children, and team members actively planning for the future and families who were more satisfied with the planning process and their level of input. These changes highlighted benefits that student centered techniques offer in IEP planning.

Limitations

Use of a small number of families from a single school system placed constraints on the findings. Although this small sample and close personal association promoted trust and allowed closer analysis and richer data because of the understanding of the stories families told, the small number of participating families limited the external generalizations or transfers which may be drawn from the data for other families and educational teams. Close association of families and team members with the first author who served as interviewer and facilitating teacher created possibility for biased findings. Yet, professionals and family participants shared clear ideas about shortfalls of the process and necessary
changes. Families contributed negatives even about the first author’s own practices. The existence of both positive and negative results verified the researcher as a neutral agent.

Needs

The following interpretations, generated from family perspectives on IEP and SCIEP meetings, provide a groundwork for developing family-professional collaboration and addressing educational planning issues identified in this study and in the literature (e.g., Hilton & Henderson, 1993; Morningstar et al., 1996).

First, planning must be designed to encourage family involvement. Providing a relaxed and open environment is the starting point for positive family-professional exchanges in which value is shown for families’ knowledge and ideas about their child. Educational teams must further support family input through verbal and written prompts that encourage families to consider student needs and problem solve issues. The SCIEP process built a role for families, which was not static, but was open for families to choose the level of activity and input they desired. Educational teams need to accept families at the level of involvement they choose never pushing families to perform what is perceived as optimal involvement. This could alienate families resulting in even less involvement and withdrawal of support. As this study illustrated, some families may be reluctant to attend IEP meetings. For these families, input through informal conversations, classroom observations, phone calls or home visits could extend a bridge towards increased family involvement.

Second, meeting dynamics must shift from being professional driven towards planning becoming a shared learning opportunity. The SCIEP process created an atmosphere of learning through the meeting structure, the information requested of families, and the ensuing discussion, which supported contributions from all team members. Families were an integral part of the team meeting as families held necessary information to complete the process. In traditional planning, families play an active role in planning only if they are advocates and educate themselves to carve out their own niche. In SCIEP the responsibility of developing one’s role is not necessary because families’ roles are built into the process. By placing equal importance on the contributions of all members, families are partners in planning. There must be an atmosphere of questioning, learning, and exchanging to support sharing and understanding among disciplines and between families and professionals.

Third, educational teams need to focus on planning for the future. As this study showed, none of the families had discussed their dreams for the future with educational team members before. With SCIEP, professionals have the opportunity to learn what families hope students to accomplish now and in the future. By focusing on the positive aspects of student functioning and student interests and using the future as a point of reference for planning, IEPs and goals become much more meaningful for families, students, and professionals.

Finally, educational teams must involve students in planning so that they may voice their interests and preferences while gaining an understanding of team expectations and the need to acquire specific skills. This can encourage increased motivation, self-awareness, and decision making leading students to become their own agents of change. For several students, SCIEP planning resulted in the sharing of dreams for the future and the consideration of objectives needed to reach the dreams. As students continue participation over time, changes are expected in their overall ability to participate, in setting and achieving goals, and in their confidence. These general outcomes are predicted and discussed throughout the self-determination literature (Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). SCIEP holds promise as one vehicle for students to develop self-determination by voicing choices, planning goals, and being partners in decision making. Using SCIEP at a young age and over a period of years may prepare students for holding greater roles of responsibility and more control in their lives as they move into adulthood. Student centered approaches to educational planning are an effective means of promoting self-determination by placing students in a position of having power to make choices about their educational program and their own lives.
Implications for Practice and Research

Teacher training programs must integrate information on student and family centered approaches to expose teachers to a variety of tools to use in educational planning with families. Along with information, teachers should participate in role play or field practice implementation through which modeling, redirection, and feedback are provided to enhance their skills for involving families in planning. For veteran teachers who renew certification through inservice training, local and regional educational service agencies should make available workshops related to specific special education needs such as family involvement. Training in the use of student and family centered planning approaches through local and regional systems has the potential to reach a vast audience with impact possibilities across numerous families. Educational efforts through teacher training in college courses and inservice training should seek to increase teacher awareness of the positive effects this type of planning can have on students, families, professionals, and the interactions of these groups. Training in student and family centered planning should emphasize teachers adapting a process, combining parts of processes, or using portions of a process to find the steps to best suit their personality and interaction style while gaining the desired assets of the planning approach for their individual meetings.

This study opens several areas of research to further explore to move educational planning and family involvement toward best practices. Certainly, further research on the use of SCIEP with a larger number of families is necessary before it can be determined if the tool will bring about positive changes in other families’ involvement. Research questions related to family characteristics such as education, ethnicity, and culture, as well as other student characteristics remain open as to their impact on this approach. Continued consideration of family baseline satisfaction with planning is important to judging the effects of SCIEP or any other family involvement approach (McNaughton, 1994). In addition, follow along research on the use of this process through the middle and high school could give insight into whether a planning tool can have far reaching effects on quality of life and post school outcomes.

As discussed in the findings, team members suggested several changes particularly with the family and student forms. What impact would modifying the forms to give families and students more ideas and options about the future have on family and student involvement? Research should follow to examine any changes in involvement that result from refinement of the SCIEP process. Though this current study did not seek to focus on student perceptions of the process, the meetings, or their attitudes toward involvement, understanding the student viewpoint can be critical. Future research of the implementation of the process with students of varying abilities should emphasize their perceptions of participation and the planning process. Study should seek information on how this type of educational planning affects student attitude, motivation, responsibility, and perception of control.

While research questions still remain regarding student centered planning, studies such as this, which change the approach to planning with families, are critical if the field expects to move forward with family involvement to meet expectations of IDEA. Without changes the majority of families will continue to fulfill the letter of the law with signatures and attendance without branching out to fulfill the intent of the law—families as partners in educational planning. The hope remains that opening opportunities for families and students as collaborative planners will assist them in realizing their dreams as reality in school and post school environments.

References


Stovitschek, J. J., &Kelso, C. A. (1989). Are we in danger of making the same mistakes with ITPs as were made with IEPs? Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 12, 139–151.


