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The ABC of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), by Carlos Ramalho, Executive Director, Living Independently for Today and Tomorrow - LIFTT

Abstract

This paper, *The ABC of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP)*, offers a comprehensive exploration of the IEP, a crucial tool for students with disabilities in the United States. The paper begins by defining the IEP and its significance within the framework of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, outlining the purpose and role it plays in ensuring a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

Next, the eligibility criteria for an IEP are discussed, emphasizing the 13 categories of disabilities that qualify a student for special education services. The paper walks through the collaborative process of creating an IEP, detailing the participation of educators, specialists, and parents in setting measurable goals that address both academic and functional needs. The practical use of IEPs in the classroom is examined, highlighting how this living document evolves through regular reviews to ensure students are making progress.

The advantages of IEPs are also explored, focusing on the tailored support and accountability they provide. Throughout the paper, practical examples are presented to illustrate how an IEP functions in real-world educational settings. The paper concludes with a discussion on the dynamic nature of IEPs and their role in fostering inclusive learning environments.

References are provided at the end of each section, and the paper includes a consolidated bibliography and recommended readings, contributing to a deeper understanding of the IEP's function and impact.



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The ABC of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Introduction

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is more than just a document; it's a dynamic tool designed to ensure that students with disabilities receive the personalized support they need to succeed in school. At its core, the IEP reflects a collaborative effort between educators, parents, and specialists, and most importantly, it centers on the child's individual needs. But what exactly is an IEP? Why is it necessary, and how does it work in practice? In this paper, we will break down the essential components of an IEP, offering a clear and comprehensive guide that both parents and educators can engage with. Each section will not only define critical aspects of the IEP but also provide practical examples of its application in educational settings.

Section 1: What is an IEP?

An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a legal document created for students with disabilities in the United States under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IEP outlines the specific educational goals for the student, the services that will be provided, and how the student's progress will be measured. Every IEP is tailored to meet the unique needs of the individual student, ensuring that they have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

Practical Example # 1

Imagine a third-grade student named Maya, who has been diagnosed with dyslexia. She struggles with reading comprehension and often falls behind her peers in class. Through her IEP, Maya receives specialized reading instruction twice a week, along with accommodations such as extra time on tests and the use of audiobooks in place of printed text. Her IEP team —



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which includes her parents, teacher, and a reading specialist — meets annually to assess her progress and update her goals as necessary.

Bibliography for Section # 1

- 1. Bateman, Barbara D., and Linden, Cynthia M.** *Better IEPs: How to Develop Legally Correct and Educationally Useful Programs.* Attainment Company, 2016.
- 2. Yell, Mitchell L.** *The Law and Special Education.* Pearson, 2019.

Section 2: What is the Purpose of an IEP?

The purpose of an IEP is multifaceted, but at its heart, it aims to provide individualized support that enables students with disabilities to achieve academic success and developmental progress in ways appropriate for their unique circumstances. An IEP establishes specific learning goals based on the student's strengths and areas of need. It also ensures accountability by requiring regular updates and revisions to address the student's evolving educational requirements.

An IEP not only serves the student but also offers a roadmap for teachers and other educators, guiding them in delivering the necessary modifications and accommodations in the classroom. It's a bridge between the child's educational needs and the school's resources, helping to remove barriers to learning.

Practical Example # 2

Consider Josh, a high school student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). His IEP not only includes academic goals but also focuses on social skills development. One of Josh's goals is to initiate conversations with peers during group activities. His teachers collaborate to provide him with



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tools like conversation prompts and role-playing exercises, which are monitored through his IEP.

Bibliography for Section # 2

1. **Gargiulo, Richard M.**, and Metcalf, Emily. *Teaching in Today's Inclusive Classrooms: A Universal Design for Learning Approach*. Cengage Learning, 2020.
2. **Heward, William L.**, and Orlansky, Michael D. *Exceptional Children: An Introduction to Special Education*. Pearson, 2017.

Section 3: Who is Eligible for an IEP?

Eligibility for an IEP is determined by a formal evaluation process, which is carried out by the school's special education team. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), children aged 3 to 21 identified as having a disability that adversely affects their educational performance may be eligible for an IEP. The 13 categories of disabilities defined under IDEA include Autism, Deafness, Emotional Disturbance, Specific Learning Disability, and others.

Below is a list of the 13 categories of disabilities that qualify children for special education services according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):

1. **Autism:** A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and non-verbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three.
2. **Deaf-Blindness:** Simultaneous hearing and visual impairments, causing severe communication, developmental, and educational needs that



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cannot be met in programs designed solely for children with either deafness or blindness.

3. **Deafness:** A hearing impairment so severe that a child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification.
4. **Developmental Delay:** For children aged 3-9, this category refers to delays in physical, cognitive, communication, social-emotional, or adaptive development.
5. **Emotional Disturbance (ED):** A condition exhibiting one or more characteristics (such as an inability to learn, difficulty in interpersonal relationships, inappropriate behavior, pervasive depression, or physical symptoms related to personal or school problems) over a long period of time that adversely affects educational performance.
6. **Hearing Impairment:** An impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but is not included under the definition of "deafness."
7. **Intellectual Disability:** Significantly sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior, manifesting during the developmental period and affecting educational performance.
8. **Multiple Disabilities:** Simultaneous impairments (such as intellectual disability-blindness or intellectual disability-orthopedic impairment), the combination of which causes severe educational needs that cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for one of the impairments.



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- 9. Orthopedic Impairment:** A severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance, which may include impairments caused by congenital anomaly, disease, or other causes (e.g., cerebral palsy, amputations, fractures).
- 10. Other Health Impairment (OHI):** Limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems (e.g., asthma, ADHD, diabetes, epilepsy, heart conditions) that adversely affect educational performance.
- 11. Specific Learning Disability (SLD):** A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, which may manifest in difficulties with listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or doing math (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia).
- 12. Speech or Language Impairment:** A communication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, or voice impairment, that adversely affects educational performance.
- 13. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI):** An acquired injury to the brain caused by external physical force, resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment that affects educational performance.

These categories ensure that students with various disabilities receive the individualized support they need through special education services.

Once a child is referred for evaluation — often by a teacher or parent — the school conducts various assessments to determine the child’s needs. If the results show that the child’s disability significantly impacts their ability to succeed in a traditional classroom setting, they are deemed eligible for an IEP.



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Practical Example # 3

Take the case of Liam, a sixth-grader struggling with attention and focus in school. After his teacher notices that Liam is frequently distracted and unable to complete tasks, the school recommends an evaluation. It's discovered that Liam has ADHD, which falls under the category of "Other Health Impairments" as defined by IDEA. Liam's IEP is then developed to provide accommodations such as extended time on assignments, movement breaks, and the use of a fidget tool to help him focus.

Bibliography for Section # 3

1. **Turnbull, Ann P.**, et al. *Families, Professionals, and Exceptionality: Positive Outcomes Through Partnerships and Trust*. Pearson, 2015.
2. **Wright, Peter W.D.**, and Wright, Pamela Darr. *Wrightslaw: Special Education Law*. Harbor House Law Press, 2020.

Section 4: Creating an IEP

The process of creating an IEP is collaborative and involves several steps. It begins with a formal meeting between the student's parents, teachers, school administrators, and relevant specialists (e.g., speech therapists or occupational therapists). This IEP team works together to assess the child's current academic achievement and functional performance, identifying the student's strengths and areas for growth.

The IEP outlines measurable annual goals, including both academic and functional objectives. These goals are tailored to the student's needs, and the team agrees on the services, accommodations, and modifications that will be provided. Importantly, parents actively participate in the IEP process, ensuring that their child's unique needs are understood and addressed.



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Practical Example # 4

Consider Emma, a second-grade student with a speech and language impairment. During the IEP meeting, her speech therapist presented assessment results showing that Emma struggles with verbal expression. Together, the IEP team sets a goal for Emma to improve her speech clarity by 20% over the next school year. The plan includes weekly speech therapy sessions and classroom accommodations such as visual aids to help Emma communicate more effectively.

Bibliography for Section # 4

1. **Bateman, David F.**, and Linden, Jenifer L. *A Teacher's Guide to Special Education*. ASCD, 2016.
2. **Smith, Tom E.C.** *Introduction to Special Education: Making a Difference*. Pearson, 2018.

Section 5: The Use of IEPs

Once the IEP is created, it becomes the blueprint for the student's education. The plan is used daily by teachers and support staff to ensure the child receives the services and accommodations outlined. IEPs are dynamic documents, meaning they must be reviewed and updated at least once a year to ensure the student is progressing toward their goals. If necessary, the IEP team can meet more frequently to adjust.

IEPs can include a variety of supports, from classroom modifications like seating arrangements and assistive technology to behavioral plans and one-on-one assistance. The plan is designed to help the student access the general education curriculum and make meaningful progress alongside their peers.



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Practical Example # 5

In the case of Ella, a seventh-grade student with a hearing impairment, her IEP includes using an FM system that amplifies her teacher's voice directly into her hearing aids. This assistive technology ensures that Ella can hear instructions clearly in a noisy classroom. Additionally, her IEP specifies preferential seating at the front of the class, which helps her stay engaged and reduces distractions.

Bibliography for Section # 5

1. **Kupper, Lisa**, et al. *The Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process: What You Need to Know*. National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2015.
2. **Gargiulo, Richard M.**, and Kilgo, Jennifer L. *An Introduction to Young Children with Special Needs: Birth Through Age Eight*. Cengage Learning, 2019.

Section 6: Advantages of an IEP

The IEP process offers numerous advantages to students with disabilities. By focusing on individualized needs, the IEP ensures that students receive tailored instruction, accommodations, and services that promote their academic and functional success. The collaborative nature of the IEP process also brings parents, teachers, and specialists together, fostering a team-based approach to a child's education.

Furthermore, the IEP ensures accountability: measurable goals and regular reviews provide a framework for tracking progress and adjusting. This systematic approach helps prevent students from falling through the cracks



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in a traditional education system that may not accommodate their specific challenges.

Practical Example # 6

For James, a high school student with a learning disability, the main advantage of his IEP is the structured support it offers. His IEP includes weekly check-ins with a resource teacher who helps him organize his assignments and manage his time. This regular guidance has significantly improved James' confidence and academic performance.

Bibliography for Section # 6

1. **Yell, Mitchell L.** *The Law and Special Education*. Pearson, 2019.
2. **Giangreco, Michael F.**, and Doyle, Mary Beth. *Quick-Guides to Inclusion: Ideas for Educating Students with Disabilities*. Brookes Publishing, 2017.

Conclusion: An IEP at Work

An IEP is not just a static document; it is a living strategy that evolves with the student's growth and needs. To see an IEP at work, imagine a classroom where students with varying disabilities are fully integrated into the general education setting. Teachers, using IEPs as their guide, provide individualized support while fostering an inclusive environment where all students can thrive.

Consolidated Bibliography

1. **Bateman, Barbara D.**, and **Linden, Cynthia M.** *Better IEPs: How to Develop Legally Correct and Educationally Useful Programs*. Attainment Company, 2016.



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6. **Gargiulo, Richard M.**, and Kilgo, Jennifer L. *An Introduction to Young Children with Special Needs: Birth Through Age Eight*. Cengage Learning, 2019.
7. **Giangreco, Michael F.**, and Doyle, Mary Beth. *Quick-Guides to Inclusion: Ideas for Educating Students with Disabilities*. Brookes Publishing, 2017.

Recommended Readings

1. **Heward, William L.**, and **Orlansky, Michael D.** *Exceptional Children: An Introduction to Special Education*. Pearson, 2017.
2. **Wright, Peter W.D.**, and Wright, Pamela Darr. *Wrightslaw: Special Education Law*. Harbor House Law Press, 2020.
3. **Smith, Tom E.C.** *Introduction to Special Education: Making a Difference*. Pearson, 2018.