

Understanding and Advocating for IEP Accommodations

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Abstract: An Individual Education Plan (IEP) guides the delivery of special education supports and services, but some students with disabilities are uncomfortable talking with their teachers about the accommodations, or they do not advocate for themselves when asking for those accommodations to take place in the classroom or during testing situations. This paper discusses how a first year middle school special education teacher in Virginia completed a project for her masters degree by working with parents and their students to understand how and why providing struggling learners with accommodations within the instructional setting can contribute to academic success. The project also evolved into a yearlong study that taught the special education teacher how peer influence can be a positive factor in helping reluctant learners develop self-advocacy skills, and she learned the importance of developing professional collaborative partnerships that ensure proper supports are put into place so that struggling learners can be academically successful.

Key words: special education, accommodations, inclusion, self-advocacy

1. Introduction

Students who receive special education services are not always aware that their Individual Education Program (IEP) guides the delivery of their special education program with specific supports and services. In particular, they do not always know that they have a right to certain accommodations to assist them so they can be academically successful. Some students who do know that accommodations are listed in their IEP are not comfortable talking with their teachers about them, or they lack the knowledge and skills needed to advocate for those accommodations in the classroom or during testing situations. Students need to learn to understand how they best learn and what they need in order to manage their disabilities. In helping the students do so, educators need to encourage students to learn about self-advocacy.

2. Purpose of the Project

When completing a Master of Science in Education-Special Education (MSE-Special Education) program at Shenandoah University, graduate students are expected to develop an awareness of the issues prevalent in today's society affecting schools and communities, diverse family structures, and obstacles that often interfere with parents and families becoming partners in education. The course takes a family engagement approach and involves self-reflection, self-assessment, and questioning on the part of the graduate students in terms of how they understand and work with the families they serve (Grant & Ray, 2016).

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When Katherine Valladares, a graduate student in the MSE-Special Education program and first year middle school special education teacher in Prince William County, Virginia, proposed her project to Diane Painter, the director of her masters program and the instructor for the course, she cited research that she had reviewed regarding how to help students manage their disabilities. In helping students understand and manage their own ways of learning, special educators need to encourage students to learn about self-advocacy (McCarthy, 2007). Teaching self-advocacy skills at a young age will eventually lead to students automatically advocating for what works best for them to be academically successful and also reduces the need for parental assistance (Alper, Schloss, & Schloss, 1995). In addition, students who become self-advocates tend to have better post-school outcomes (Test, Fowler, Wood, Brewer, & Eddy, 2005).

When discussing the approach she would take with the students and their parents in helping students manage their own learning, Valladares felt that her middle school students and their parents must first understand the students' strengths and challenges. Then they must understand why accommodations listed on IEPs are essential in helping the students become academically successful. Accommodations allow students to complete the same assignment or test as other students, but with a change in the timing, formatting, setting, scheduling, response and/or presentation. An accommodation does not alter in any significant way what the test or assignment measures. Students need to "own" their accommodations in order for them to advocate for their implementation in their classes. Based on what Valladares had read in research studies and best practices literature, she felt that these would be essential steps that she must take to help her students become self-directed, successful learners.

3. Project Implementation

Valladares obtained permission from her school's administration to hold an information night in the 2014 fall term for her students and their parents for the purpose of helping the participants better understand why accommodations are included in special education IEPs. She also wanted to help her students become more comfortable advocating for their IEP accommodations. Therefore, she stated that the goal of this evening session was to provide her students and their families with information about IEP accommodations and why it was important that students become self-advocates in order for them to experience positive educational success.

Sixteen families of students with disabilities were invited to attend the session Valladares titled *YES! I Can!* But because the event was held during the 7th grade curriculum night when the students and their parents come together as a community to view showcased student work, only three families chose to also attend the IEP information session.

Before the event began, parents and students completed a short survey that she called a "ticket-in" at the beginning of the session. Valladares wanted to determine what parents and their students understood about IEP accommodations, so she asked them to state the reasons for the accommodations on their students' IEP. She also wanted to know how they felt the accommodations were helping the students succeed in school.

Only one family indicated an awareness that accommodations were on their student's IEP. The other two students knew that they had use of a calculator for mathematics tests and read aloud accommodations for tests and quizzes, but they stated that they were embarrassed to be pulled out of class in order for the read aloud accommodations to take place during testing situations. After discussing with the students why they have the read aloud accommodations and how it helps them process what is being asked on tests, it appeared to Valladares that the students were more open to learning more about their other accommodations.

Initially planned as an information night, this session turned into a small group gathering resulting in lively discussions at one round table. The two students who stated that they did not initially understand their accommodations appeared to attentively listen to the one student who stated she knew about her accommodations. This led to an open and frank dialogue about how students can advocate for themselves since the knowledgeable student was so frank about how she advocates for herself. Valladares noted in her critical reflection journal:

It was very moving to witness this exchange of information. One of my students shared with them that she attends her IEP meetings and shares with her teachers how she feels she is doing academically, and what she feels she needs help with. She shared that she takes part in the discussions about what tools might benefit her in order to overcome difficulties that she faces in school. My other two students asked her if she got nervous having to talk in front of all of the teachers. She responded that she would be more embarrassed if she got bad grades, so she chooses to make sure that everyone knows what she needs.

During this exchange, Valladares observed that the girl's parents stated that they were initially afraid that their daughter would not get her accommodations unless she asked for them. So the parents agreed with their daughter's statements, sharing with others at the meeting that they wanted to ensure that their daughter knew her goals and accommodations so that she would always understand what she was working to accomplish. The parents also said they were very proud of their daughter for advocating for herself, and for sharing her experiences with the other students.

Valladares also noted in her journal, I did not expect the meeting to turn out as it did, but I am glad that it did because the other students and their parents were able to learn in depth from one of their peers about the importance of self-advocacy.

When Valladares met with her course instructor to discuss the evening's event, it appeared to Painter that complementary learning was taking place during this evening session because one family was so willing to talk with the other families about the importance of accommodations and how parents can help children develop self-advocacy skills. Painter explained that complementary learning, developed by the Harvard Family Research Project, is based on the belief that schools cannot provide everything children need but that an integrated school and community approach can better ensure that all children have opportunities to succeed (Grant & Ray, 2016, p. 388).

Valladares also shared with her instructor the feedback parents and students gave at the meeting when they completed an *exit* ticket. All the participants stated that the event was a positive experience. The mothers of the students who initially had little understanding of accommodations or self-advocacy stated that they were happy that they had come to the meeting, and that they felt much more knowledgeable about their children's accommodations. In addition, the two students who learned about their accommodations at this evening event also indicated that they would check in with their special education case manager when progress reports and report cards were sent home to discuss how they are doing when it comes to self-advocacy, and review the effectiveness of their accommodations.

4. Determining Next Steps

After Valladares told other general education and special education teachers at her school what happened at the evening's IEP information event, they talked about the importance of providing students with opportunities to ask any question, address any concerns, and share self-advocacy tips in a safe and accepting environment. The

teaching staff agreed that helping students become advocates for their own accommodations is vitally important to ensure the students' overall educational success. It was decided that the special education teachers would periodically meet with students they serve during the school day so their students could share with one another their success stories about the use of their accommodations and self-advocacy.

5. Progress Monitoring

In order to determine what ongoing initiatives, if any, were taking place throughout the school year, Painter suggested to Valladares that she continue keeping her project journal so that throughout the school year she could note how the students were doing with developing self-advocacy skills. After all, she pointed out that it will take time to determine in what ways Valladares' students were managing their own learning and she would want to monitor progress toward that goal.

Throughout the year, Valladares held debriefing sessions with her small group of students during instructional periods or when she provided the read-aloud accommodations during testing sessions. Before sending the students back to their classes, she asked her students, "How do you feel about me reading the test aloud for you? Does it help you? Why or why not?" Based on the student interactions, it seemed to Valladares that students who stated that they benefit from the read-aloud accommodations were most eager to share with their fellow students why it benefits them. Valladares also noted that students who appeared resistant to leaving their classes for read-aloud accommodations acted this way because they did not like to be singled out from the other students in their general education classes. However, when these reluctant students heard from fellow students why having the read-aloud accommodations benefit them during the testing sessions, this seemed to have a positive effect because over time, the reluctant students became more receptive to receiving accommodations. Valladares observed during the debriefing sessions that students agreed that the process of having directions, story problems and other text read to them during testing situations generally helped them understand the information that was presented on the tests they were taking.

6. Follow-up with Information Night Attendees

During the school year, Valladares closely monitored the two students who initially stated in the fall IEP evening session that they did not understand the purpose of their accommodations. When Valladares met with Painter in an advising session at the end of the school year, she shared what she was learning from her ongoing project. She stated:

I have worked closely with the mother of one of my students to make sure that he is aware of his accommodations. His mother really would like for him to advocate for himself and by working together, we have been able to make that happen for him. For example, he has severe learning deficits in math. He is above grade level when it comes to reading, but in math, he gets frustrated easily due to the vocabulary terms. When he reads math problems, he does not pronounce math terms correctly, and this confuses him. But when he hears the teacher read the math problems in class, stating terms correctly such as order of operations, proportions, dissect, and intersect, he is able to correctly complete his seat work containing the math terms. Because he noticed that it helps him when his teacher reads aloud math terms, the student suggested to me that he come with my read aloud group to see if it would help him when taking his math tests. We tried it for a month with his weekly quizzes and we saw such an improvement! We decided to add read aloud as an IEP accommodation for math so that he could continue to receive that accommodation as well as have it when he takes his SOL math test [summative math test]. The student is aware of how he learns best, and he lets his

teachers know what he needs be successful.

When asked about the progress of the second student, Valladares responded:

He has not shown growth when it comes to self-advocacy. He is fairly reliant on his mother, and does not appear to support his advocating for himself. I think that if she allowed him to make some decisions for himself, he would have the confidence he needs to advocate for himself.

Painter asked Valladares what she learned from her project that she thinks has helped her grow professionally. Valladares stated that the school's administration noted that since she has a firm understanding about IEP accommodations, her principal asked her to create a roster of *all* students in her school receiving accommodations, listing their specific accommodations for testing in order to ensure that the accommodations were made available during end-of-year testing. Because accommodations are also often planned for English language learners, she had to check the records of students receiving English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services. For example, allowing a student who is learning to write English the opportunity to state his answers orally is an example of an accommodation that allows the student to show he knows the same material and can answer the same questions as fully as the other students who are writing their responses.

Valladares described her experience working with three grade levels of students in special education and with students who receive accommodations related to their ESOL services:

My role in the end of the year testing has been quite the experience. What I have done is to go through each roster and make sure that any student who receives any accommodation through Special Education or ESOL services receives those accommodations. It has been difficult for several reasons. Case managers sent accommodations to me that they would like the students to receive, however, when I checked the students' IEPs, the requested accommodations were not indicated in those IEPs. In other cases, when I created a spreadsheet to keep track of the students' accommodations, I found when double-checking their IEPs changes had been made to the IEPs but the case managers had not sent me those updates. Another issue I had was with students who are dually identified as ESOL and SPED. What was stated on a student's IEP did not always match the student's ESOL accommodation. For example, a student's ESOL case manager stated that the student must be given a math test stated in simple English terms [called a plain English math test], but the student's IEP stated the student would be given the standard math test that all grade six students take. We discovered this on the day the student was supposed to complete the math SOL test and the student just sat there until we could resolve the issue.

Painter asked Valladares, "How did the issue get resolved?" According to Valladares, the dually identified child took the standard computer-based SOL math test instead of the plain English version. However, because he was a special education student, the accommodations listed on his IEP were made available (audio that allowed the child to select text and have it read to him, use of the calculator on the non-calculator portions of the test, and use of an English dictionary). Valladares explained why this decision was made:

We have to go by what is stated on the student's IEP since it is a legal document signed by the parent. When the ESOL case manager enters accommodations into a program that tracks the ESOL services, this creates a document that states ESOL testing accommodations, but it is not a document signed by the parent.

But Valladares also made a very important point regarding accommodations during testing situations:

When students receive accommodations during testing sessions, these should be the same accommodations the students have had all year. If a student has never had a test read aloud to him, he should not have his SOL [end-of year summative test] read to him. What I have realized throughout this entire process is that there is a

lot that goes on behind the scenes when it comes to testing. As case managers, we need to make sure that we have our paperwork in line, to ensure that the process seems seamless to a nervous student waiting to take a test.

7. Final Thoughts

For Valladares this project began with the goal for her students and their parents to understand how and why accommodations are often included in special education IEPs. But this project also evolved into a yearlong systematic study of what happens when peers share their self-advocacy experiences. In addition, Valladares' critical analysis of her experiences regarding implementation of testing accommodations helped her appreciate the importance of developing professional collaborative partnerships with general education teachers and ESOL teachers in order to ensure proper supports are put into place so that struggling learners can be academically successful.

Mentoring the graduate student throughout the project also enabled Painter, the course instructor and head of the Special Education masters program, to learn firsthand what this first year special education teacher experienced in terms of building and strengthening collaborative and working relationships with her students, their families, and the other professionals in her school. It was encouraging to Painter to determine how the course requirement of keeping a critical reflective journal gave Valladares the tool she needed to record, analyze and reflect upon her project's initiatives so that she could determine what actions needed to be taken in order to help her middle school students develop self-advocacy skills and manage their own learning.

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