

Pre-service Teachers & Special Education Paperwork: Project Based Learning

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Paperwork is undoubtedly one of the more stressful aspects of special education. Having a strong understanding of the special education process from referral to implementation is imperative to completing paperwork that meets the needs of each student while maintaining compliance and adhering to federal guidelines. The use of project-based learning (PBL) can be an excellent tool in preparing pre-service teachers for the rigor and demands of the special education process. Implementing mock Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings can provide pre-service and newly certified teachers the hands-on experience to create reports, produce IEPs, effectively lead meetings, and experience the entirety of the special education process including referral, evaluation, qualification, determination, and implementation of services. The recommended protocol is provided for higher education professors and school administrators to arrange mock IEP meetings in their own courses/districts to ensure that pre-service and newly certified teachers are confident and competent to lead meetings and prepare special education documents.

Keywords: special education, IEP, IEP meeting, individualized education program, special education collaboration

Background

Special education and paperwork go hand in hand. Completing paperwork and leading IEP meetings can be very daunting and stressful for pre-service teachers and newly certified teachers. As students receiving special education services are a historically marginalized group, recruiting and retaining competent special education teachers is of great importance to help students with special needs reach their greatest potential. Ensuring that pre-service and newly certified teachers feel confident and competent to produce accurate documentation and communicate with families will help provide students with disabilities with the best services possible. Furthermore, when pre-service and newly certified teachers feel confident in their abilities, it could possibly help with retention of special education teachers.

College professors and district administrators are responsible for producing competent teachers that can prepare special education paperwork and communicate clearly with families and other professionals. Participating in mock meetings allows pre-service and newly certified teachers to gain real-world, applicable experience in this area. Mock IEP meetings allow pre-service and newly certified teachers to go experience the process of

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taking a mock student through the processes of evaluation, qualification, determination, and implementation of services. Pre-service and newly certified teachers can experience the entire Evaluation Report/Reevaluation Report (ER/RR) and IEP process by preparing special education documents and leading their own IEP meeting with peers, area administrators, and current teachers. Furthermore, engaging community stakeholders in mock meetings provides pre-service and newly certified teachers with feedback regarding their own written and verbal communication skills while further enhancing the real-world experience.

Literature Review

Research proves the effectiveness of project-based learning (PBL). PBL refers to an “inquiry-based instructional method that engages learners in knowledge construction by having them accomplish meaningful projects and develop real-world products” (Brundiers & Wiek, 2013, p. 1728). Engaging pre-service and newly certified teachers in PBL activities, such as constructing their own special education paperwork and leading a mock meeting for feedback could enable teachers to feel more comfortable and competent in the special education process. They can actively engage in the special education process while producing a product.

According to a meta-analysis conducted in higher education, PBL and the creation of products are “of importance because it helps learners to integrate and reconstruct their [students’] knowledge, discover and improve their professional skills, and increase their interest in the discipline and the ability to work with others” (Guo, Saab, Post, & Admiraal, 2020, p. 2). Special educators must have the ability to collaborate with other professionals such as regular education teachers, administrators, related service providers, and most importantly, family members. They must also be able to use the knowledge they have learned about disabilities, goal writing, and IEP’s and apply it to a real-world situation. Furthermore, engaging in a mock IEP process allows pre-service and newly certified teachers to work on their professional communication skills by verbally reviewing written documentation with current administrators and practicing teachers.

PBL provides pre-service and newly certified teachers with the ability to solve problems that will be applicable to them in the field of education while actively engaging in the process. Upon investigating the implications of PBL in higher education, Ngereja, Hussein, and Andersen (2020, p. 1) noted that PBL assignments “enables the creation of real-life experiences, which further stimulates the creation and development of real-life competencies” which are skills that all special education teachers need to possess. Engaging in a PBL activity, such as mock IEP meetings can have a “positive impact on student learning, motivation, and performance both in the short and long term” (Ngereja et al., 2020, p. 1). Assigning pre-service and newly certified teachers their own mock student to produce paperwork for can increase their learning motivation as they must take what they have learned in all of their coursework and apply it to a real-world situation. Furthermore, increasing pre-service and newly certified teachers’ motivation could help to increase retention rates among special education teachers.

Steps for Implementation

To successfully implement mock IEPs in their programming, higher education professionals and administrators should engage in the following:

1. Assign an individual mock student with an evaluation report to each pre-service and/or newly certified teacher.
2. Systematically teach each step of the process:

- (a) Explain how to interpret the evaluation data;
 - (b) Issue invitation;
 - (c) Prepare IEP and re-evaluation report;
 - (d) Model meeting.
3. Have pre-service and/or newly certified teachers practice leading meetings with peers.
4. Engage community stakeholders in mock meetings by reaching out to administrators and/or current classroom teachers.
5. Plan and host IEP meetings:
- (a) Have pre-service and/or newly certified teachers sign up for a meeting time;
 - (b) Construct Feedback Form for participants to provide critique of IEP meeting for pre-service and/or newly certified teacher.

Considerations

Higher education professionals and administrators may wish to consider the following:

- (a) Collaboration between multiple professors/courses.
 - (b) For larger courses, may wish to consider assigning multiple pre-service and/or newly certified teachers to the same mock student or assigning pre-service and/or newly certified teachers to pairs/groups.
 - (c) For evaluation reports, consider collaborating with a local school district to gain access to actual evaluation reports. Redact any identifiable information and provide reports to pre-service and/or newly certified teachers.
 - (d) To engage community stakeholders in mock meetings, consider recruiting students in graduate level programming who are current teachers and/or administrators.
 - (e) When leading an IEP meeting to model the process for pre-service and/or newly certified teachers, consider recording the meeting so that it can be accessed and referenced.
 - (f) Consider constructing Peer Feedback Forms and Participant Feedback Forms for peers and participants to utilize during mock meetings.
 - (g) When hosting meetings, consider using an online platform, such as Zoom, to accommodate community participants.
- Also, consider using breakout rooms in Zoom to host multiple IEP meetings at a time.
- (h) Explore obtaining access for the IEP documentation platform used in your area.

In Pennsylvania, IEPWriter is used (Retrieved from <https://www.iepwriter.com/info/>). College and universities are able to access a college account where they are able to assign usernames to pre-service and/or newly certified teachers for training purposes.

PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS & SPECIAL EDUCATION PAPERWORK

██████████ SD

EVALUATION REPORT (ER)

School Age

Student Name: ██████████

Date of Report(mm/dd/yyyy): 4/29/2019 Date Report Provided to Parent/Guardian/Surrogate: 4/29/2019

Student Birth Date: 5/21/2013 Age: 5 Grade: K (Full)

Local Education Agency (LEA): ██████████ SD

School Student is Attending: ██████████

Current Educational Program: Regular Education

County of Residence: ██████████

Name and Address of Parent/Guardian/Surrogate: ██████████

Phone(Home): ██████████

Phone(Work): ██████████

Phone(Cell): ██████████

Email(Home): ██████████

Email(Work): ██████████

Other Information: None.

Complete Sections 1 through 6 for all students.
If determining eligibility for Specific Learning Disability (SLD), the SLD component near the end of this document must be completed and used to complete Sections 5 and 6.

1. REASON(S) FOR REFERRAL:

██████████ has been referred for an evaluation by parent request in order to determine if he is a student with a disability and if he is in need of specially designed instruction.

2. SOURCES OF EVALUATION DATA - In interpreting evaluation data, the school must draw upon a variety of data sources, including those listed below, and carefully consider the information obtained. Document the information obtained from the sources below.

A. Evaluations and information provided by the parent of the student (or documentation of LEA's attempts to obtain parental input):

A review of the parent/guardian questionnaire completed by ██████████ follows:

██████████ is kind and compassionate. He loves counting and reciting the alphabet. ██████████ draws well for a five-year-old. He is friendly and plays well with others. ██████████ hates to share, but will if he is asked.

██████████ doesn't seem to retain any information. He learns things, but very slowly. Reading and

Figure 1. Redacted evaluation report.

Thursday, March 31

<https://sru.zoom.us/j/96361639139>

Meeting ID: 963 6163 9139

10:00 – 10:50 am

Breakout Room #	Host	Mock Student	Peers	Administrators/Current Teachers
1	Garrett ██████████	Riley Smith (1 st gr)	Cassandra ██████████	Gina ██████████ High School Life Skills – Plum Borough SD
		ID	Office Online Frame ██████████	Andrew ██████████, Dir. Student Sys - Sharpsville
		Speech	Danny ██████████	Kelsey ██████████ (121)
2	Olivia ██████████	Addison Jones (8yo, 3 rd gr)	Sarah Heavner	Megan ██████████ Program Dir. - ISST (640)
		SLD – Math Comp.	Makenzie Burr	Colleen ██████████ 8-10 Sp.Ed Philly Charter School (640)
			Courtney Wilson	Jennifer ██████████, Dir. Of Sp. Ed. - Karns City
3	Koryn ██████████	Eric Richards (Kindergarten)	Victoria ██████████	Alicia ██████████ Kindergarten Tchr – Norwin SD (640)
		Emotional Dist.	Madison ██████████	James ██████████ Dir. Sp. Svcs – Shenango SD
			Carly ██████████	

11:00 am – 12:00 pm

Breakout Room #	Host	Mock Student	Peers	Administrators/Current Teachers
1	Cassandra ██████████	Riley Smith (7yo, 2 nd gr)	Garrett ██████████	Gina ██████████ High School Life Skills – Plum Borough SD
		OHI – ADHD	Sarah ██████████	Staci ██████████ Dir. Sp. Ed. - Neshannock SD
		Speech	Courtney ██████████	

Figure 2. Mock IEP planning document.

✓	Section	What to look for	Recommendations
	1	Legal Core Team Members ___ Parents/Guardians ___ Student (must be invited when transition needs are being considered) ___ General Education Teacher ___ Special Education Teacher ___ Administrator / LEA ___ Team member licensed in the area of the student's disability ___ When appropriate, other individuals with knowledge or expertise regarding the learner. ___ Outside agency members when applicable	
	2	3__ Disability listed	
	2	Present Levels of Academic Achievement & Functional Performance The IEP includes an update of the student's present levels of academic achievement	
	2	Present Levels of Academic Achievement & Functional Performance The IEP includes an update of the student's present levels of functional performance	
	2	Present Levels of Academic Achievement & Functional Performance	

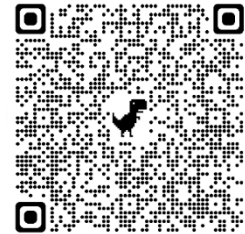


Figure 3. Peer editing checklist.

Conclusion

PBL allows students to apply knowledge to real-world situations and settings. Engaging in PBL to instruct pre-service and/or newly certified teachers in best practices for writing special education documents and leading meetings can lead to pre-service and/or newly certified teachers that feel more confident in their abilities. Providing pre-service and/or newly certified teachers with the opportunity to engage in special education paperwork and documents based off actual students with special needs can help to create more meaningful learning experiences for students. Encouraging participation from community stakeholders, such as school administrators and current classroom teachers provides pre-service and/or newly certified teachers the opportunity to elicit feedback while developing and increasing their professionalism. According to a pre-service teacher who went through the mock IEP process, “I think the IEP process can be tedious and intimidating, but once we went through it, I felt like it was not as hard as I [had] thought. I feel a lot more confident after going through the process and hosting my own meeting”.

References

- Brundiers, K., & Wiek, A. (2013). Do we teach what we preach? An international comparison of problem-and project-based learning courses in sustainability. *Sustainability*, 5(4), 1725-1746.
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