

Engaging the Families of Students with Disabilities Using Comprehensible IEPs

Lusa Lo
University of Massachusetts Boston
USA

Abstract

Individualized education program (IEP) is a legally binding document in the United States for all students with disabilities who are eligible to receiving special education services under the regulation, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. IEP details students' strengths and needs and the services and supports they receive inside and outside of school during the calendar year. Special education services can be provided only after schools and families of the students agree to them. Before families can sign the IEPs to show their agreement, they need to first read and comprehend them, so they can determine if the services and placement proposed by schools address their child's individualized needs. However, previous studies have shown that many special education related school documents were written at a high reading level that could impact their understanding of their contents. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the reading levels of 82 IEPs that were written in 2021-2023. Results indicated that the IEPs were written at a college graduate reading level which was much higher than the fifth grade reading level recommended by previous researchers. The excessive use of terminology and acronyms, small font size, and typographical errors also further hindered the comprehensibility of the documents. Implications for research to practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

When students encounter any academic difficulties, many states in the United States (U. S.) have adopted the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework which focuses on providing targeted interventions and supports based on their needs [1]. Supports for students are organized into three tiers. In Tier 1, the needs of the students can be reached by using high quality whole group instruction. Students in Tier 2 require supports beyond whole group instructions. Small group instructions and supports that are aligned with student needs are provided. Finally, students in Tier 3 are ones who have severe and ongoing needs that Tier 2 supports are insufficient to address them. These students require intensive individualized instruction and support to address their individualized needs. When some of these students are suspected as ones with a disability, their teachers will begin the special

education referral process.

With permission of their families, schools conduct formal and informal assessments to determine students' eligibility for receiving special education services funded by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) [2]. For those who are found to be eligible, an individualized education program (IEP) team is formed [2]. The team consists of the student with disabilities, their family, school professionals, and relevant service providers. IEP team members work collaboratively and develop students' IEP which is a legally binding document which details the strengths and needs of the their academic and functional performance, areas that are impacted by the disability, needed accommodations and modifications, annual academic and functional goals and short-term objectives, and types of special education services that are needed [2]. This entire process requires close partnerships between schools and families. Any decisions that are made in the process must be agreed by all IEP team members.

The purpose of the IEP, a legally binding document, is to ensure that any decisions schools make about the student's educational services are discussed with and agreed by the students' families [2]. Furthermore, IEP holds schools accountable for providing the services and supports that are agreed by the team. After IEP team meets, an IEP will be drafted and provided to the family who have 30 days to decide if they accept or reject what schools propose. When the IEP is agreed by the entire team, it will be executed, and special education services and supports will be provided to the student immediately. Otherwise, the team would have to address the family's concerns regarding why the proposed services and support are insufficient and/or inappropriate to meet students' individualized needs and revise accordingly.

Once children are diagnosed with a medical disability or found to be eligible to receive special education services under IDEA 2004, their families receive a huge number of documents related to their needs. These documents include but are not limited to medical reports, early intervention paperwork, evaluation consent forms, progress reports, annual IEP meeting notices, annual IEPs, notice of procedural safeguards, and transition planning related documents. Before families can know if they should

accept what schools and service providers offer and advocate for their children with disabilities, they need to be able to read the documents and comprehend their contents. However, previous researchers have consistently found that special education related documents have been written at a high reading level that not all families can fully understand their contents [3], [4], [5], [6].

When children are diagnosed with a disability, their special education services, early intervention, may begin as early as when they are at birth. Service coordinators, families, and relevant specialists work together and create the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), a legally binding document, which outlines services and supports the state will provide to the child and their family [2]. One study conducted by Pizur-Barnekow and colleagues examined the reading levels of 85 IFSPs that were developed by seven agencies [4]. They found that the average reading level of the documents was at or above eighth grade level. In another related study, Pizur-Barnekow and colleagues reviewed 94 documents that were shared with families of young children with disabilities during early intervention and also found that they were written at or above high school level, when the recommended reading level should be at fifth grade [5].

For students with disabilities who are enrolled in public schools, Notice of Procedural Safeguards is one of the essential documents schools must provide to families. This notice outlines families' rights and protections under IDEA 2004. For instance, schools cannot begin testing students for special education eligibility determination without parental consent. There is a specific timeline schools must follow during the special education process, such as how long they can take to evaluate students and when IEP meetings must be scheduled after evaluations are completed. Additionally, if families object to the evaluation results and/or services and supports proposed by schools, details about what steps they can take are also included in the notice. In 1984, Roit and Pfohl examined the reading level of notices of procedural safeguards from 25 of the states and found that they were written at the fourth to ninth grade level [6]. In 2006, Fitzgerald and Walkins replicated the study and reviewed notices of procedural safeguards from 49 states [3]. Their results showed that the reading levels of these notices got higher. Almost half of them were written at a college level.

Approximately 89% of the U. S. population age 25 and older indicate that their highest level of school completed is high school or above [7]. Although the number of high school graduates continues to increase each year, previous research warns us not to interpret that their highest level of school completed is equivalent to their reading level, since reading levels of many adults may be several grades lower than their highest level of school completed [8], [9].

Additionally, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that there was a decline in average reading performance of grade 12 students in the U. S. [7].

Furthermore, U. S. is the country in the world that has the most immigrants who comprise 15% of the population [10]. Some states have even higher number of immigrants than others, such as California (28%) and Texas (18%) [10]. The growth of immigrants can also be seen in the U. S. student population. In 2021, 23% of public school students were immigrants [11]. In the school year of 2022-23, over half of the special education student population were from culturally and linguistically diverse background [12], [13], [2]. Many of these students' families are non-English speakers and/or limited in English and rely heavily on translated school documents. When the reading level of English documents are high, their translated versions are most likely to be high. Quintero and her colleagues analyzed Spanish translated notices of procedural safeguards of all 50 states and found that they were written at 11th and 12th grade level which is higher than the fifth grade reading level recommended by previous researchers [14].

With previous research in mind, IEP is a legally binding document that families must be able to read and comprehend its content, so they can decide if the services and supports proposed by the schools address the individualized needs of their child with disabilities. There is a need to investigate how comprehensible schools' IEPs are. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the reading level of 82 English IEPs that were written during the school year of 2021-2023.

2. Methods

Eighty-eight redacted IEPs were collected from three of the largest school districts in one of the states in the U. S.. Prior to receiving the IEPs, all personal identifications, such as student names and addresses, were already removed. Six of the IEPs were found to have missing pages and were removed from the study. A total of 82 IEPs were evaluated in this study.

Reading level of a piece of text refers to how easy or difficult it is for readers to read and comprehend its contents [15]. There are many available formulas that can be used to determine the reading level of a piece of text, such as Flesch Reading Ease, New Dale-Chall, and Automated Readability Index. This study chose to use the Flesch Reading Ease and New Dale-Chall formulas [16], [17], since they are most commonly used in social sciences and in previous studies that examined the reading levels of school related documents [3], [4], [5], [6].

In addition to using readability formulas to determine the IEPs' reading level, this study also examined the text characteristics of the documents. Although identifying the reading level of the collected

IEPs can be helpful, they can be considered as oversimplified, since characteristics of the text could further impact how easy and difficult readers read and comprehend the document. Therefore, besides the reading levels, this study also examined various types of characteristics of the IEPs, including font size, line spacing, number of pages, the number of jargons and acronyms that were used, and number of grammatical and typographical errors.

3. Results

The results of the study showed that the reviewed IEPs might not be comprehensible to many families. The IEPs had very high reading levels. Other characteristics, such as the use of acronyms and jargons, also made them even more difficult to read and comprehend.

3.1. Reading levels

This study investigated the reading level of 82 IEPs. Results indicated that the average reading level of the collected IEPs was at college graduate level which was much higher than the fifth grade reading level recommended by previous studies [3], [4], [5]. The average Flesch Reading Ease for the IEPs was 26.3 (SD = 18.1) which indicated that the documents were best understood by college graduates [17]. When using the New Dale-Chall formulas, the reading level was at 13.5 (SD = 10.8) which also suggested that the materials were very difficult and were written at the College graduate level [16].

In addition to determining the reading levels, text characteristics of the IEPs were also examined, including the number of pages in the document, font size and line spacing, number of jargons and acronyms used, and grammatical and typographical errors.

3.2. Number of pages

The number of pages of the collected IEPs ranged from 12 to 21 pages. Students with disabilities who had more needs than others and/or had multiple disabilities were most likely to have longer IEPs. For instance, one IEP belonged to a student who was diagnosed with autism, visual impairment, and emotional and behavioral disorder was 21-page long, since the IEP team had to explain the student's needs in detail. The students also had many annual academic and functional goals and short-term objectives that they had to work on during the calendar year.

3.3. Font size and line spacing

All IEPs were written using single line spacing. Only 12 of the collected IEPs had an extra line spacing

between paragraphs.

Font size is measured by the point size which is the vertical measurement of a letter. A 28-point font is about 0.38 inch. Common documents are usually written in 12-point font which are about one-sixth of an inch. However, the font size may vary by the type of font that are used. For example, a 12-point Verdana font will be slightly larger than a 12-point Times New Roman font.

The font size of the collected IEPs ranged from 0.042 inches to 0.069 inches, which was about 3-point to 5-point. A mix of font types was used. They included Times New Roman, Calibri, and Arial Narrow.

3.4. Use of acronyms and jargons

Acronyms refer to abbreviations of words, while jargons refer to special words that are used specifically in a field. One example of an acronym is ADHD which refers to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. One example of a jargon that is commonly used in the field of special education is "preferential seating" which refers to seating arrangement in a classroom that can help address the student's needs.

Among the 82 IEPs, approximately 8 to 12 acronyms were used. The number of jargons found on the IEPs ranged from 10 to 38.

3.5. Grammatical and typographical errors

During the examination of the IEPs, many grammatical and typographical errors were found. The number of these errors ranged from 5 to 34.

In addition to grammatical and typographical errors, incomplete sentences/paragraphs were also found. One example was that one school professional was expected to provide information about the baseline data of the student's performance in reading comprehension, so annual goals and short-term objectives of the skill could be determined. In the baseline section of the IEP, they wrote "Students were unable to identify them." They did not complete the sentence/paragraph by providing the required assessment data and information.

4. Discussions

Families of students with disabilities receive a tremendous amount of school documents that are relevant to their students with disabilities. Among them, one of the key documents families receive at least annually is their child's IEP which is a legally binding document that includes information relevant to the student's school performance and services and supports that are proposed/will be provided by schools. This document is also used to hold schools accountable for providing the agreed services and

supports.

Before IEPs can be executed and services and supports can be provided, professionals and families must agree and sign them. Prior to deciding if they should accept or reject the IEPs, families must first be able to read and comprehend their contents. However, the results of this study showed that many families may have difficulty doing so. This study examined the reading level of 82 English IEPs and found that they were written at the College graduate level, so much higher than what previous studies have recommended, fifth grade reading level [3], [4], [5]. When English IEPs are written at a high reading level, it can also impact the reading level of the translated version of the IEPs. Quintero and her colleagues analyzed Spanish translated notices of procedural safeguard of all 50 states and found that they were written at 11th and 12th grade level [14].

In addition to the reading level, this study examined the characteristics of the IEPs that might further hinder readers from reading and understanding the documents. These characteristics included the number of pages in the document, font size, line spacing, number of acronyms and jargons used, and number of grammatical and typographical errors. Results of the study found that excessive acronyms and jargons were used on the IEPs. Families who do not have any special education training background would have difficulty knowing what these terms are referring. Additionally, when translators translate these documents, they could also have difficulty translating these terms from English to the target languages, since not all terms are available in another language. Moreover, many translators may have never received training in special education and are unfamiliar with these terms, so they could not provide proper translations of these terms. Lo and Wu examined 20 Chinese translated IEPs and found that when translators did not know the acronyms and jargons on the IEPs, they often chose to omit the information, copy the acronyms and jargons without any translations, and/or translate them literally to the target language which changed the original meaning of the terms [18]. This could confuse families and/or mislead them to make wrong decisions related to their child's IEPs.

Furthermore, this study found that, in addition to reading level and use of acronyms and jargons, limited line spacing and small font size could make the IEPs even much more difficult to read. Many grammatical and typographical errors were also noted. These errors were unacceptable in legal documents.

Today we live in a world that advanced technology is available everywhere. All the noted issues of the IEPs this study found can be easily addressed. Although some schools may be required to generate their students' IEPs using a designated application which may not allow them to check their reading level, professionals can always export the documents

to Microsoft Word or Google Docs which have built-in features that use a variety of readability formulas to check its reading level. They can also use these tools to check spelling and grammatical errors.

Additionally, when acronyms and terminology must be used on IEPs, school professionals need to explain what they are, so families can understand them. When IEPs need to be translated, translators would also be able to provide accurate translations. Schools can also consider attaching a glossary to each IEP, so families can further understand what these terms are [9].

5. Conclusion

As the number of students with disabilities continues to grow [20], schools consistently agree that families are their equal partners which means that when they work collaboratively, the ones who benefit will be the students. This is especially true in special education. Families are the students' decision makers and advocates. They are also the crucial members in their child's IEP team. Schools are required to partner with families and actively engage them throughout the entire special education process, so they can work collaboratively and ensure that students with disabilities are receiving the services and supports they need. One of the crucial documents in this process is students' IEP. Families must be able to read and comprehend their child's IEPs, so they can properly advocate for them for the services and support that are needed. IEPs need to be written at no higher than fifth grade reading level. English speaking families and multilingual families who rely on translated version of the IEPs can also benefit from this change.

6. References

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