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Final Paper

Draft 5/2/16

### **Bringing students to the table: Increasing middle school involvement in IEPs**

When I met Samuel, he was an incoming 8th grade student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a specific learning disability and ADHD. His IEP set his service minutes for Language Arts to take place half in the resource setting for writing support and half in the inclusion setting for reading support. It quickly became clear that this back-and-forth schedule during the Language Arts block was disruptive and disjointed. The adults involved with Samuel's plan - myself, the resource teacher, the general education teacher, the case manager, and Samuel's mother - met and decided to revise his IEP to move him fully to resource for Language Arts. When I told him what we had decided, Samuel was unhappy and expressed that he thought he should be in the inclusion setting full time. I gave him the specific criteria we needed to see in order to move him to full inclusion: grades, fluency and comprehension level, and standardized test scores. Three months later, at the semester change, Samuel came to me with his data in hand: he had As and Bs in resource, had grown several levels in reading fluency and comprehension, and met the target test score. He said, "I'm ready for inclusion." And he was right.

When students are aware of the contents of their IEPs, brought to the table as part of the IEP team (in a way that Samuel was not at the time), and empowered to advocate for themselves, they become better equipped to participate in their own

educational decision-making. Inspired by Samuel taking ownership of his educational setting, I set out to see what happens when middle school students learn about and participate in creating their IEPs. In particular, I wanted to find out:

- What happens to student knowledge of the reason for and purpose of their IEP?
- What happens to student self-advocacy for accommodations and modifications?
- What happens to student awareness of progress towards IEP goals?
- What happens to the student's role in the annual IEP meeting?

### **Rationale**

The impetus for this research question grew out of a Chicago Foundation for Education (CFE) study group on Transition and Self-Determination, led by Anna Garcia and Lisa Love, in which I participated in the 2014-2015 school year. The study group was guided by the principles of the text *Self Determination: Instructional and Assessment Strategies* (Wehmeyer & Field, 2007), as well as the Transition Coalition, Virginia Department of Education Self-Determination Project, and the Inclusive Schools Network. Through the study group, I learned about the importance and impact of student participation in IEP development and developed strategies to increase student understanding and ownership of the IEP process.

Along with another special education teacher, I met with our principal, assistant principal, and case manager at the beginning of October 2015 to review the policy I proposed. They wholeheartedly agreed that it was a good idea to prepare and include middle school students, and only had concerns related to the logistics. We agreed that for initial IEPs and triennial re-evaluations, students will not attend the eligibility

determination portion of the meeting (a section in which all clinicians give technical reports based on their assessments), and that students will be brought in at the time that the actual IEP meeting begins. The teachers who serve middle school students agreed to divide up our preparation of students based on grade level, so that we are able to meet with students during our prep period/their specials period. We also agreed on some guidelines for student preparation and participation:

- the special education teacher will explain when the meeting is to take place and who will be attending;
- the teacher will walk the student through each section of the IEP to explain the contents;
- the teacher will record student input in Section 7 (strengths, needs, learning style, etc.) using the format “[Student Name] reports that…” or “From the student…”;
- the teacher will review the existing accommodations and modifications for classroom settings and assessments, and include student input on which accommodations and modifications would be helpful;
- the teacher will review the student’s progress on their previous annual IEP goals and discuss the upcoming annual IEP goals with the student;
- the teacher will encourage the student to bring and/or discuss work samples that reflect progress on their previous annual IEP goals;
- students will be seated in proximity to the special education teacher in order to be able to read their input directly from the eIEP; and
- at minimum, students are asked to introduce themselves at the meeting.

The collaborative nature of this project has the potential to impact a great number of students and teachers at our school over time. In effect, policy has already changed at my school: we now have a stated policy of inviting all middle school students to their IEP meetings. In the past, only 8th grade students were required to attend (per federal law). Through this study, I hope to institutionalize this policy so that it continues in perpetuity, explore the possibility of extending the practice into the intermediate grades, track the impact that the policy has on students and involved adults, and share my findings with a wider audience to encourage others to adopt a policy of including more students in their IEPs.

### **School context**

My school is a Level 1+ neighborhood public school located in Chicago. It was authorized as an International Baccalaureate school for both the Primary Years and Middle Years programmes in 2013-2014. We currently have 930 students enrolled in Pre-K through 8th grade. We are one of three regional gifted bilingual centers in Chicago; one section per grade level K-8 is comprised of students from around the city who are bilingual in Spanish and English and labeled gifted.

Our school population reflects the shifting demographics of our neighborhood. Currently, our students are 79% Hispanic, 15.5% White, 1.7% Asian, and 1.4% Black. However, the demographic shift is evident between the primary and upper grades, with the upper grades being predominantly Hispanic and the younger grades slightly more diverse. In addition, many of the families of students in our upper grades have moved out of our neighborhood boundaries.

According to our CPS School Profile, our population is 72.2% low income, including some homeless students. 18.1% of our students have limited English proficiency and we have a transitional bilingual program that services students. 8.5% of our students are diverse learners. The diverse learners' primary diagnoses are:

- 4 students (5%) are diagnosed as Autistic
- 7 students (8.9%) are diagnosed with a Developmental Delay
- 3 students (3.8%) are diagnosed with an Emotional/Behavioral Disorder
- 1 student (1%) is diagnosed with a Mild Intellectual Impairment (Educable Mentally Handicapped)
- 42 students (53.8%) are diagnosed with a Specific Learning Disability (typically dyslexia)
- 9 students (11.5%) are diagnosed with Other Health Impairment (typically ADHD)
- 12 students (15.4%) have a Speech/Language Pathology
- 45 students have 504 plans, typically for asthma, diabetes, or ADHD

Our Special Education staff currently consists of seven teachers and six paraprofessionals. We are organized into the following instructional units as special education teachers (there is some overlap of caseloads in the primary/intermediate grades and significant overlap in the upper grades, with students seeing up to three different special education teachers throughout the day):

- Teacher A serves 14 students grades K-3 in resource and inclusion settings for language arts, math and independent functioning
- Teacher B serves 16 students grades 4-5 in the resource setting for math, science, social studies, and language arts

- Teacher C serves 18 students in grades 5 and 7 in the inclusion setting for science, language arts, math and independent functioning
- Teacher D serves 20 students in grades 6 and 7 in the resource and inclusion settings for science, social studies, language arts, math, and independent functioning
- Teacher E serves 20 students in grades K, 7 and 8 in the resource and inclusion settings for science, social studies, language arts, math and independent functioning
- Teacher F serves 23 students in grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 in the resource and inclusion settings for language arts, social studies, math, science, and independent functioning.
- I currently serve 25 students in grades 6, 7 and 8 in the resource and inclusion settings for science, language arts, math and independent functioning

The International Baccalaureate (IB) certification of our school has many implications for professional development, instructional practices, and educational philosophy. Nearly all teachers at all grade levels have participated in at least one intensive IB training, which is divided up by subject area and category, one being introductory, two being intermediate, and three being advanced. I have participated in category two training for both Language & Literature and Mathematics. Through these trainings, teachers learn best practice to construct IB unit plans, collaborate with colleagues, formatively and summatively assess student learning, design assessments with real-world context grounded in inquiry, and promote holistic student development. These practices are reflected in the IB mission statement:

*The International Baccalaureate® aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.*

*To this end the organization works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment.*

*These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right.*

In practice, the mission of the IB programme is reflected throughout our school culture: we organize our schedule into a six-day rotation to meet minimum hours of PE, the Arts, Language B (Spanish), and Design; we acknowledge staff and students on a monthly basis for demonstrating aspects of the IB Learner Profile; we create space for grade-level and subject-level collaboration time, and periodically meet for vertical articulation through the primary and middle years programmes; we encourage arts integration, research skill acquisition, real-world experience, and service learning, which are supported through unique staff schedules, field trips, and external partnerships.

### **Literature review**

As a special education teacher, I believe that one of my most important jobs is to help students understand their strengths and needs so that they can make meaningful choices in life. In order to promote self-determination in my middle school students, I began preparing them to participate more actively in their educational planning process.

Since I began preparing students for Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings in the 2014-2015 school year, I noticed the following positive benefits in a few individual cases:

- improved student understanding of the contents of an IEP;
- student self-advocacy for accommodations and modifications (A&M) stated in the IEP;
- student self-advocacy for a change of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) placement;
- improved student understanding of IEP goals and participation in monitoring progress;
- more inclusive and positive language used by adults during the IEP meeting; and
- more accountability of adults to honor student accommodations and modifications.

Through a review of literature, I have found that these anecdotal observations are supported by research studies conducted across the country.

### Current levels of student participation

Students with disabilities most often have decisions made *for* them by adults who talk *about* them. When student input is considered, it's often in the most cursory or surface way, for example, asking a student to share her hobbies or interests.

Several studies and national surveys indicate that special educators value student self-determination, but are dissatisfied with current levels of student participation in the educational process (Mason, 2004). This is not surprising, given the

following statistics about student participation in IEP meetings, from a study by Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, Gardner, Christensen, Woods and Lovett (2006a):

- special education teachers talked 51% of the time; students talked 3% of the time;
- 92% of meetings were started by a special education teacher; none were started by a student;
- 21.9% of students said no teacher had talked to them about the IEP meeting ahead of time; and
- students self-reported the lowest prior knowledge about the IEP meeting of all meeting participants.

These statistics reflect the generally-accepted practice of holding IEP meetings at which teachers, clinicians and parents make decisions on behalf of the students. In fact, until the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), student involvement was not required by law. Nearly twenty years out from this reauthorization, the current state of student involvement barely meets the requirement: students at age 14 ½ or in eighth grade (and every year thereafter) must be present at their annual meeting. However, Martin, et. al, (2006a), found that student attendance at meetings is not the same as student engagement in educational planning.

Students may sit passively at a meeting in which adults talk about them and for them, never speaking, asking a question, or offering their own ideas. While this technically meets the legal requirement set out by IDEA, it does not reflect active participation in the educational process. In the meetings studied by Martin, et. al, (2006a), less than 10% of students introduced themselves, introduced the IEP team

members, reviewed past goals, asked questions, dealt with differences in opinion, or stated needed support. In the same study, no students stated the purpose of the meeting, asked for feedback, or closed the meeting. 20% of students expressed their skills and limits, 27.1% of students expressed opinions and goals, and 49.4% of students expressed interests. Clearly, the involved adults expected that students were only able to talk about very basic information and that they did not possess the leadership skills required to run a meeting. When surveyed, nearly 40% of the adults perceived that students participated a lot, though students actually participated only 3% of the time. This could indicate low expectations for student participation. Students are not expected to participate in meaningful ways in their IEP meetings, because they have not been taught how to do so.

#### The importance of explicit instruction

As any educator knows, students cannot be expected to display skills they have not been explicitly taught. However, in my experience, students required to attend an IEP meeting for the first time in eighth grade have often been given no prior exposure to their IEP document, the purpose of the meeting, their IEP goals, or any of the other information that will be discussed at the meeting. Students need explicit instruction about the IEP document and meeting, as well as an opportunity to practice the skills required to participate actively.

Several educators and researchers have worked on step-by-step programs to help teach IEP participation skills to students with disabilities. Martin, Marshall, Maxson and Jerman designed the “Self-Directed IEP” curriculum to help students learn “goal

setting, planning, self-evaluation, mediation, public speaking, and self-advocacy” skills (Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, Greene, Gardner, & Lovett, 2006b, p. 300). Multiple independent studies have confirmed the effectiveness of this curriculum in increasing student participation in and understanding of IEP meetings. Mason, McGahee-Kovac and Johnson (2004) created a similar structure outlining levels of student involvement and specific objectives to be taught in each of six preparation sessions. Hart and Brehm (2013) explain a plan for helping elementary students understand their IEPs with a focus on accommodations, including a 10-step process for teaching students to advocate for their accommodations in the inclusion setting. Wehmeyer and Field (2007) outline elements of self-advocacy that can be taught and practiced through participation in educational planning.

Specific steps outlined by all of these authors included teaching students the purpose of the meeting so that they can state it, instructing students in effective communication skills, including nonverbal communication and questioning, and conducting personalized conversations about goals, accommodations, and necessary supports. In each study, the authors explained the time and preparation required by teachers in order to effectively prepare students, often utilizing resource class periods to conduct whole group and individual lessons in communication skills, and involving videos or role plays to practice the skills.

While I did not use any of these curricula outright in my study, I was inspired by their components and used many of the same approaches to preparing students for their IEP meetings and teaching them the necessary communication and self-advocacy skills. Martin, et. al, (2006b) showed that students who learned the skills of the “Self-

Directed IEP” curriculum participated and led meetings more than students who did not learn those skills. A case study of a student, “Erika,” in Mason, et. al’s study (2004), showed that with teacher support, preparation sessions can help students prepare for any challenges or difficulties that may come up in the meeting. In my experience, the act of preparing students for the meeting also has an impact on the involved adults, as they must take into account the student’s views and desires when creating the IEP document. With this level of preparation and practice, students can rise to much higher expectations of active involvement in setting and monitoring their own educational goals, making them a true member of the IEP team.

### Student outcomes

The self-advocacy skills taught in preparation for participating in IEP meetings can have long-term positive effects on the lives of students with disabilities. Mason, et. al. (2004), show that students who led their IEP meetings were better informed about their own disabilities, rights, and accommodations, and that the act of leading the meeting resulted in improved self-advocacy and self-confidence. Wehmeyer and Field (2007) cite several studies that indicate increased engagement, classroom involvement, and academic skills as immediate benefits of learning self-determination skills.

Communication with adults and other decision-makers can be improved through the skills learned in this process. For example, when students understand their legal rights, they can better explain them to their parents (Mason, et. al., 2004). Students gain important social and problem-solving skills that can be used throughout their academic careers, in post-secondary settings and in the work world. Wehmeyer and

Field (2007) found that students with higher levels of self-determination skills had improved employment outcomes, greater access to job benefits, increased earning potential, and a measurably higher quality of life.

The ongoing actions of self-awareness, assertive and positive communication, and conflict resolution are important life skills for any child to learn. For students with disabilities, these skills are particularly vital. According to Hart and Brehm (2013), since the known outcomes for students with high levels of self-determination are so significant, it makes sense to explicitly teach these skills as soon as possible. In that way, students gain additional years of practice applying these skills. Mason, et. al. (2004), report that “students gain confidence and communication skills...[they] tell us anecdotally that because they have practiced asking for accommodations and talking to others about their disability, they find it easier to apply self-advocacy skills in college or on the job” (p. 22). As a special education teacher, my primary goal is to help students gain the skills needed to flourish independently in a life filled with options and choices. Self-advocacy skills are essential to this outcome.

### Why start younger?

This year, our school adopted a policy of preparing all middle school students (sixth through eighth grade) to participate in their IEP meetings. Research has suggested that the beneficial outcomes of participation in IEPs can extend to even much younger students. Mason, et. al. (2004), suggests that participation in elementary school is important for meaningful preparation for high school meetings and decisions. Martin, et. al. (2006a), confirms this prediction and calls for more research into

participation by younger students. Younger students need the time to learn these self-advocacy skills before they are expected to weigh in on high-stakes decisions such as which high school courses will prepare them for their desired post-secondary placement, or which independent living skills they need to learn to prepare to live on their own.

The effect of participation can be even more immediate. In Hart and Brehm's study (2013), the elementary students were better able to advocate for the accommodations they needed to successfully function in the inclusion setting. When students understand their disability and their accommodations, they are equipped to ask for the supports they need to be successful in school.

While the benefits of participation seem clear, there is still a need for policies supporting younger students' participation in their educational planning. Martin, et. al., (2006b) calls for "the next iteration of IDEA...to expand the expectation that students be taught the skills to become active participants in their educational planning meetings, and that students should be expected to attend their IEP meetings as early as the upper elementary years" (p. 315). The National Information Center for Children and Youth With Disabilities concurs, as cited by Wehmeyer and Field (2007): "not every student will be able to write his or her own entire IEP, but all should--and can--participate in some fashion" (p. 55). While levels of participation should vary depending on the age and developmental ability of the individual student, there is no reason for exclusion of students to be the norm.

The purpose of this study is to collect more data from a wider range of students (all 6th through 8th grade students), include the other middle school special education

teachers in the process of preparing students to participate in their IEP meetings, and track specific outcomes for students in an organized way. I believe that the collaborative nature of this project has the potential to impact a great number of students and teachers at our school, with implications for the entire district and even national policy.

### **Data collection methods**

Student survey: In mid-November/early December 2015, I administered a 15-question survey to the 6th-8th grade students in my resource math and science classes (Appendix A). Students in my math resource class were able to refer to their quarter 1 math IEP goals in their notebooks while answering these questions. Students in my science resource class were able to ask for assistance from the Special Education Classroom Assistant while completing the survey. I re-administered a revised version of the survey (Appendix D) in mid-March to gauge how much more students knew about their IEP after approximately four months of interventions.

IEP goal reflection & progress monitoring: At the beginning of the year, I sat down with each student in my math and science resource classes to discuss their first quarter IEP goals for that subject. Thereafter, I met with each student 1-on-1 at the end of first, second and third quarters to ask them to reflect on their progress, to share my progress monitoring results, to discuss their goals for the upcoming quarter, and to ask them to make a plan for meeting those goals. I recorded student comments in a document while interviewing them. Students in my math resource class maintained a section of their notebook with their goals and reflections.

Meeting to prepare for IEP: With the cooperation of three of the other middle school special education teachers, all 6th-8th grade students with IEPs had a meeting

with a special education teacher in advance of their annual IEP meeting. In some cases, one teacher would interview a student about all subject areas. In others, each teacher would meet with the student to discuss the subject area for which they teach them. Teachers recorded observations as field notes in a shared document. Student input on their IEP was recorded in the IEP document in Section 7 (Strengths & Needs), from which I pulled representative quotes showing student input on strengths, needs, LRE placement and preferred learning style/A&M.

Observations during IEP meeting: After the first few meetings of the school year, I developed an observational checklist (Appendix B) based on the steps for student-led IEP meetings published by Martin, et. al (2006). I marked off which of the 12 steps I observed each student performing, whether they were prompted or not, and observations of the student and adults at the meeting. For meetings I was unable to attend, I asked the other middle school special education teachers to record notes in a shared document about the student's participation in the meeting.

Accommodations & modifications (A&M) questionnaire: Beginning in January, I provided all students in my math and science resource classes with copies of their testing accommodations and modifications. We reviewed the meaning of each accommodation, discussed how they look in practice, and role-played how to request them of a general education teacher. Then, each time students took a test or quiz, I gave them a short questionnaire before the test (Appendix C). Students used their A&M page to list two accommodations they would need during their test and how they would help them. Then, I recorded which students actually requested/used given accommodations during the quiz.

Teacher Journals: I have been journaling throughout the research process, about what I'm doing in class, student responses, and how data collection is going.

### **Data and Interpretation**

My data is organized into four sections, with analysis and interpretation contained within each section:

1. Knowledge of IEP as demonstrated by pre- and post-survey responses;
2. Participation in creation of IEP and IEP meeting as recorded in observation log, field notes, quotes from IEP documents, and pre- and post-survey responses;
3. Knowledge and use of Testing Accommodations & Modifications, based on five administrations of a pre-test questionnaire, observation of students during tests, and pre- and post-survey responses; and
4. Awareness of IEP goals and self-monitoring of progress, based on notes from two quarterly meetings with students and pre- and post-survey responses.

#### **1. Student knowledge of IEP**

I analyzed students' responses to the aligned pre- and post-survey questions to determine if and how student answers changed after intervention. 16 students were in my resource math and science classes at both times the survey was administered (n=16); other students had placement changes during the course of the year and only took one of the surveys. Data for the first question, "What is an IEP?" is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Survey Responses to Question 1: “What is an IEP?”

<b>Change in Response</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 16)</b>
Went from “I don’t know” to a reasonable definition	5
Answer is more specific	5
No change - still good definition	5
No change - vague answer	1

Between the administration of the pre-survey in November 2015 and the post-survey in March 2016, 10 of 16 students demonstrated stronger, more specific knowledge of what an IEP is; five students went from saying they didn’t know to giving a reasonable definition, and five students gave more specific answers. Some examples include:

- On the pre-survey, Sofia replied: “I really don’t know.” On the post-survey, she answered: “When you have a meeting about how you are doing in school.”
- On the pre-survey, Benjamin replied: “It is a survey that you do a test.” On the post-survey, his answer was: “An IEP is a meeting where people talk about you.”

Another five students had reasonably strong answers in both the pre- and post-survey, and one student gave a vague answer both times. Overall, the data show that students have a better understanding of the definition of an IEP after interventions (one-on-one conferences with special education teacher(s) to prepare for IEP meeting). This relates strongly to their preparation for and participation in their annual IEP meetings. At

the time of the pre-survey, 3 of the 16 students had attended an IEP meeting. By the time of the post-survey, 12 of the 16 students had attended.

The second question on the survey asked students why they have an IEP. This question was meant to gauge how much exposure they have had to the terms of their label (i.e., specific learning disability, autism, other health impairment, emotional disability, etc.) as well as to see if they understood the purpose of their IEP. Data comparing their pre- and post-survey responses is found in Table 2.

Table 2: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Survey Responses to Question 2: “Why do you have an IEP?”

<b>Change in Response</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 16)</b>
Post response specifically mentions student’s disability	2
Post response more specific	1
Both responses refer to needing help	6
Went from I don’t know to a decent reason	2
Post response off-track	5

The data here show that students need a great deal more direct instruction on their particular disability and its implications for them. Only two students were able to refer to their specific disability in their post-survey response, which indicates that those two students truly understand why they have an IEP. The six students who responded both in the pre- and post-survey that an IEP has to do with needing extra help have a vague, superficial understanding of the reason for an IEP document, and their language reflects the watered-down explanations adults often communicate to them. Example responses include:

- On the pre-survey, Lucas replied: “So we can learn better.” On the post-survey, he said: “So we can get help in math and all the other ones.” I infer “ones” here to mean his other academic subjects.
- On the pre-survey, Lucia responded: “Because I need help to get my grades higher.” On the post-survey, she said: “So the teachers and school adults know in what way and how to help you.”

This suggests that an important next step would be to develop lessons that teach students about the challenges and strengths in their individual learning needs and how their disability may affect their learning and social interactions. A positive outcome suggested by this data is that two students went from saying they didn’t know why they had an IEP to giving a reasonable answer. However, another five students gave an entirely off-track answer in the post-survey, suggesting they didn’t actually understand the question.

## 2. Student participation in IEP meetings

I used Martin, et. al.’s (2006) 12 steps for student leadership at an IEP meeting to code student participation. At first, I was using my anecdotal notes and observations to do so. Then, I developed an IEP Observation Log with the 12 steps listed so I could check them off as I saw them take place, as well as record notes about the student and adults during the meeting itself. I recorded data from 11 students (n=11), because their IEP meetings occurred during the data collection period and I attended their meetings. The data for the student leadership steps is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Observed student leadership actions during IEP meetings.

<b>Student Leadership Action</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 11)</b>
Dealt with a difference in opinion	3
Stated the purpose of the meeting	3
Stated needed support	6
Expressed interests	7
Introduced themselves	7
Expressed opinions and goals	8
Reviewed past goals and progress	9
Expressed skills and limits	11

No students performed the following steps: introduce IEP team members, ask for feedback, ask questions if didn't understand, close meeting by thanking everyone. I have never instructed students to introduce the other team members or close the meeting, so I would not expect them to perform either of those steps. It is a bit concerning that students did not ask questions during the meeting, however, I would expect that nervousness, shyness, or an inclination to not show dissent are at the root of that behavior

The data show that students are able to identify strengths and needs in various academic subject areas, when given the opportunity. Students can talk about the types of supports that help them, and what learning styles benefit them most. Most students can express opinions about their learning, reflect on their progress, and discuss their strengths and needs.

Because the goal of this intervention was to increase student participation, I believe the data show a positive result, despite the fact that there were several student

leadership steps that most students did not perform. Here, I am making a distinction between student participation in an IEP meeting and a student-led IEP meeting. I think that student leadership, as proposed by Martin, et. al., is a longer-term goal, to be aimed for when perhaps the current 6th graders participating in these interventions are in 8th grade. For example, several of the steps that I haven't taught my students (introducing the team, closing the meeting) are signs of student leadership, and I am not expecting to see them. Other elements are more concerning, such as the student introducing him or herself. This didn't happen in four cases for different reasons - in some cases, the meeting began without the student present, in others, the adults launched into a conversation without introducing themselves. I do think this is problematic, as it silences the student voice before the student has had a chance to participate. I believe that some professional development for adults involved in IEP meetings, including parents, would help to mitigate this issue.

Depending on the student, participation had to be prompted to varying degrees. Some students were much more comfortable speaking at the meeting, and were able to interject or disagree with the adults. Other students were very reluctant to speak, and had to be prompted to read from their prepared remarks in the eIEP document. I think this speaks to the need for differentiated expectations of student participation based on age, grade, experience with the IEP, and cognitive ability.

While student verbal participation in the IEP meeting is important, it is not the only measure of student voice. I pulled quotes from IEP documents that reflect student voice and engagement in four areas; students shared out these statements to the team at the meeting and the data is presented in Table 4. For this data set, I recorded information from 13 IEP documents (n=13), as I was unable to attend meetings for two students but could analyze their input from the IEP itself.

Table 4: Student voice in IEP document.

Area of IEP	Number of Students (out of 13)	Quotes
Identified a specific strength	13	<p>"Julieta reports that she is feeling very motivated in Math class now that it is making sense to her and she has the opportunity to explain concepts to others."</p> <p>"In Math, Diego says, "I am good at long division, fractions, and scientific notation."</p>
Identified a specific need	13	<p>"I struggle mainly with division." (Camila)</p> <p>"I need to work on spelling words correctly. I need to work on reading long words, because sometimes if they are big, I can't read it." (Gabriel)</p>
Gave input on preferred learning style and/or accommodations and modifications	10	<p>"Alejandro reports that he learns best by watching. He likes to learn by watching Brainpop videos. He prefers to work on his own. He likes to listen to relaxing music while he works."</p> <p>"I learn best in a room that is not loud. I like when I work in a small group with the teacher. I like to watch videos. I do not like to read in science - I would rather do an experiment." (Gabriel)</p>
Gave input on their LRE placement	6	<p>"Julieta has been reflecting on her various placements in Math and said that "I think the environment makes a big difference --in the special ed resource room and in the slower--paced 8th grade Math class, I know others kids are struggling too and so we spend more time to learn the material and take good notes. In Gifted Math it just went so fast."</p> <p>"Santiago feels like he is ready for an Inclusion math setting as long he starts to get better at doing his homework."</p>

The data show that all 13 students were able to reflect on their academic strengths and needs when given the opportunity. This suggests that there is no reason that an adult (teacher, parent, clinician) should be the only one reporting on a student's strengths and needs in Section 7 of the IEP document, or verbalizing those comments at the meeting. Students are able to give specific areas of strength or need and should be given the opportunity to speak for themselves. By recording this participation in the IEP document itself, the participating adults acknowledge that the student is in fact a vital member of the IEP team, whose voice and input should be heard and taken into consideration when educational decisions are made.

It is important to note that three of the students quoted above either were already in an inclusion setting, or had a change of LRE placement to inclusion during this school year. I believe that there is a strong correlation between a student's self-awareness of strengths, needs, and learning preferences, and their ability to self-advocate for a transition to inclusion. For example, Gabriel began the year in resource science. It became clear in the weeks leading up to his annual IEP that he was ready for an inclusion setting: he was achieving high B's, demonstrating independent comprehension of scientific concepts, and was able to complete lab procedures with minimal assistance. More importantly, Gabriel was eager to make this transition. His LRE was revised to move him to inclusion science, however, no teacher was available at that time, so the team decided to wait to make the change until Gabriel would have support in place. Gabriel then proceeded to raise the question on an almost weekly basis about the timeframe in which he would transition to inclusion. In the months since that move took place, both Gabriel and his general education teacher have reported a great deal

of success. Gabriel enjoys his science class and demonstrates enthusiasm about all of the labs. His teacher is routinely pleased that he is able to meet her high expectations with support from the inclusion teacher.

In terms of preferred learning style and accommodations and modifications, one shortfall of my data collection process was that I was not present at every meeting to prepare students for their IEP. When my colleagues met with students, I know that they discussed these two areas, however, the inclusion of student input was not done in a standardized manner. Some teachers included student voice after the phrase “from the student.” Others included a direct quote. However, several IEP documents described what works best for a student in terms of learning style and A&M without clarifying whether this was the teacher or student’s opinion. Therefore, I was only able to count the six instances in which the student’s opinion was clearly stated. Overall, I do believe that increased conversations about the types of learning that work best for a student took place, and that this benefits both student and teacher in terms of reflecting on pedagogical approaches and individualized learning.

The data also suggest that more work is needed to help students understand the criteria by which they have been placed in a particular instructional setting, as well as what specific benchmarks they will need to meet in order to transition to a less restrictive environment. Although I know that all students had a teacher explain what their current placement was and what the new IEP would reflect in terms of service minutes and LRE, only six students were able to speak directly to their LRE placement. I believe that part of the reason for this is that the teachers themselves are still developing specific criteria for placement changes. This has been an ongoing

conversation in our school this year, and while our criteria for reading and math are fairly standardized, we are still developing our expectations for science and social studies. As we adults continue to refine and clarify our criteria for placing students in resource or inclusion, we will better be able to communicate with students about what they need to strive for in order to change settings.

Finally, the pre- and post-survey provided an opportunity for students to explain their understanding of what takes place at an IEP meeting and comment on their own participation and feelings about the meeting. Data from the relevant questions is included in Table 5.

Table 5: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Survey Responses to Question 3: “What happens at an IEP meeting?” and 4: “Have you been to an IEP meeting? If yes, describe what you said at the meeting. If yes, describe how you felt at the meeting.”

Question	Pre-Survey	Post-Survey
3. What happens at an IEP meeting?	13 students gave reasonable answer  3 students did not know	16 students gave reasonable answer
4. Have you been to an IEP meeting?	6 students said yes  10 students said no	11 students said yes  5 students said no
4a. What did you say?	(not asked in pre-survey)	9 students said they spoke  2 students said they did not speak
4b. How did you feel?	4 students expressed negative emotions (scared, nervous, etc.)  2 students did not express an emotion	8 students expressed negative emotions (scared, nervous, etc.)  3 students expressed positive emotions (happy, good, normal)

This data shows that, even for students who have not yet attended an IEP meeting due to scheduling, the various conversations, class discussions, and the fact of their peers having attended, contributed to an increase in understanding of what happens at an IEP meeting. The three students who said they did not know what happens at an IEP meeting on the pre-survey responded as follows on the post-survey:

- Sofia: “They talk to you about how you are doing in school.”
- Alejandro: “I was talk about my subject.” (I infer this to mean his academic subjects.)
- Andres: “An IEP meeting your teachers see what you learned in each of your classes.”

The data from question four is as expected: more students have been to an IEP meeting this year than last year, because the special education teachers came together with administration to institute a policy of participation from all middle school students. The five students who responded “no” will still attend their meetings before the year is over.

In the post-survey, I added a question about what students said at the IEP meeting. Of course, I have other evidence of what they said (my observation log, other special education teachers’ field notes, student quotes from the IEP document), but I wanted to hear their perspective. I was surprised to find that two students claimed not to have spoken. Sebastian is not remembering correctly, because I sat next to him while he read his input on strengths and needs during the meeting. Camila is also not remembering correctly, because although I did not attend the meeting, the special education teacher who did recorded the following field notes:

*“Camila seemed slightly uncomfortable being at the meeting, but not too much so. She participated actively when she was asked questions and also gave her two cents when she agreed or disagreed with things being said. Camila was engaged in a discussion of what she can do better to help her grade in Math. Camila agreed with the team decision to place her in the General Ed Inclusion setting for Science once a teacher was available to teach that class.”*

I was curious to know what led Camila to claim she did not speak at her meeting. When questioned later about her response, Camila said she forgot. When I probed further, she said her mom kept disagreeing with her, for example, when the team was discussing if she should still be in the “small room” (resource setting) for science, her mom said yes, and Camila said no. Camila then told me, “the meeting was weird.” I told her I understood that, but that I hoped that over time it would feel less weird because she would know what was happening. So, while Camila did in fact speak at the meeting, she felt that her opinions were not valued equal to the adults’, and this made her feel silenced. Once again, the implication is that involved adults need further professional development in order to encourage student voice and self-advocacy.

Finally, the post-survey asked students to describe how they felt at their meeting. While the overwhelming negative emotions - eight students in the post-survey expressed feeling nervous, scared, shy, etc. - are all expected, it is encouraging to see that three students felt positive about their meeting. I do not believe that the goal should be to change their emotions or get rid of nervousness, rather, I would be interested to see how these students’ self-assessments change over time and with ongoing participation. Will they feel more comfortable once they know the routine of an IEP

meeting better? Does it matter where the meeting takes place and who is present? For example, one meeting this year took place in the classroom instead of the case manager's office, and the only people present were the student, parent, two special education teachers and (briefly) one general education teacher. My reflection on this meeting is summarized in an excerpt from my teacher journal, dated March 6, 2016:

*“These details are very significant, as I think that not having additional adults present (i.e., the case manager, psychologist) and being in a familiar space (not the case manager's office) allowed Matthew to feel more comfortable. The meeting was very conversational, comfortable, and Matthew really seemed like an equal part of the team. I noticed [the other special education teacher] spent most of the meeting talking directly to Matthew, rather than his mother. Matthew responded to questions, gave input, interjected and disagreed with ease. In fact, Matthew discussed his academic strengths and preferences without even looking at the IEP document. Most of the time, we prep students and include their quotes in the eIEP so that they can read directly from it at the meeting. Matthew didn't need this support and spoke freely. He showed a great deal of confidence and spoke persuasively about his need to be independent in order to focus.”*

I would be interested to see how changing the setting and participants may lead to students feeling more comfortable. However, Matthew's own assessment of the meeting did not match mine. When asked on the post-survey how he felt at the meeting, he replied: “Disappointment.” I followed up with Matthew a few weeks later to ask him what he meant by that. He said, “It was a personal reason because I didn't get moved to another class like I was supposed to.” I asked him which class, and he said, “For I&S

[Social Studies]. She (the other special education teacher) said she held me back so I would do better next year.” I thanked him for the explanation, letting him know that I thought it was one of the best IEPs I’d been to all year, because he seemed so comfortable. He acknowledged that he was comfortable, and the only reason he felt disappointment was because he expected an LRE change that didn’t take place. This could be seen in a positive light, however, because it shows that Matthew knew about the opportunity to change LRE placements for a specific class, and had built up hope around that expectation. His awareness that the move was possible, and that it was something he was looking forward to, shows a high level of self-knowledge about his LRE placement and his personal goals.

### 3. Student knowledge and use of testing accommodations & modifications

I began directly instructing students about their testing accommodations and modifications (A&M) following the example of Hart and Brehm (2013). I decided to focus on the 16 students in my resource math and science classes because I have full control over the instructional program, including the timing and content of assessments, and was able to dedicate class time to discussing A&M. I began by giving each student a copy of the Assessment A&M page from their IEP. We defined specific terms used in that section and discussed what they might look like in practice. I helped students understand that an accommodation like “extend time by 50%” might, in practice, mean that the teacher reduces the problem set instead, so that the student can finish the assessment in one class period. We also discussed how the resource setting is considered a small group with minimal distractions, as opposed to the larger classrooms

in the general education setting. Students were able to ask questions, and many were surprised to find out that they had testing accommodations in subjects like World Language (Spanish).

I then explained to students that while resource teachers typically intentionally plan for these A&M, it's important for students to know which A&M they have, particularly in inclusion settings, as their general education teacher may not be as familiar with the IEP document. I talked students through how they might self-advocate for a needed accommodation, how to approach the teacher, and what to do if the request is denied. I encouraged students to keep their copy of their A&M page in a safe location that travels with them from class to class, such as their agenda. That way, they would be able to present the page to the teacher to show that they do, indeed, need that accommodation. I also recommended that students ultimately accept the teacher's decision, and then come and speak to one of their special education teachers for support in correcting a misconception should the teacher deny the requested accommodation.

I followed up this direct instruction with ongoing application. For the next two months, each time I gave an in-class assessment, I began with a testing A&M questionnaire (Appendix C). Students used their testing A&M page to identify two accommodations they would use on the test or quiz, and then explained how that would help them to be successful. I administered this questionnaire three times to my science resource class and twice to my math resource class. I also kept observational notes of which accommodations all students used and which accommodations specific students requested.

Through these interventions, students increased their understanding of their own accommodations, as demonstrated by their response on post-survey question eight, highlighted in Table 6.

Table 6: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Survey Responses to Question 8: “Give an example of a testing accommodation or modification that you have.”

<b>Change in Response</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 11)</b>
From incorrect to correct answer with specific language from IEP	2
From incorrect to correct answer	2
From don't know to correct answer	2
From correct pre to vague post	2
Correct pre and post	1
Incorrect pre and post	1
From don't know to vague answer	1

As the data in Table 6 shows, seven out of 11 students were able to give a specific example of a testing accommodation. The four students who gave an incorrect or vague answer, however, may have lacked focus on the day the post-survey was administered, because each of these students was, in fact, able to cite one or two specific testing accommodations on the testing A&M survey administered immediately prior to a test, as shown in Table 6A.

Table 6A: Student knowledge of specific accommodations based on Testing A&M Questionnaire.

<b>Test Date and Class</b>	<b>Number of students able to name 2 testing accommodations</b>	<b>Number of students able to name only 1 testing accommodation</b>	<b>Total students tested</b>
1/13/16 - Science	8	1	9
1/26/16 - Math	7	0	7
2/9/16 - Science	9	1	10
3/4/16 - Science	5	4	9
3/18/16 - Math	8	0	8

According to this data, all 16 of the students in my science and math resource classes were able to refer to at least one, if not two, specific testing accommodations that they wanted to use to support them on a test or quiz. Of course, having their A&M page available as a resource to them was a critical part of this process. Without that support, students likely would have struggled to remember the wording of their accommodations. One change that I made over time was that initially, I would collect the A&M questionnaire prior to starting the quiz. Students would typically put away their A&M page at that time. I realized that I was in essence removing the support that I needed to provide: students needed ongoing access to their list of A&M in order to self-advocate for those accommodations. I adjusted this, and in the last two testing sessions, left the questionnaires and A&M pages on the students' desks during the quiz and specifically encouraged them to use those documents as reminders of what they could ask for during the quiz.

While students were able to name two accommodations from their list, many students named accommodations that they didn't use. This is puzzling to me. Why state that you need to take breaks when you never ask to take a break? Why identify using a calculator as helpful when you don't ask to use a calculator? I wonder if students are always being truly thoughtful about what will benefit them, or if they are just choosing two items from the list at random.

At each administration of the A&M questionnaire, I asked students to explain how the accommodations they cited would help them to be successful on the test or quiz. While this question was not part of my pre-survey, I did include it in my post-survey. The results are highlighted in Table 7.

Table 7: Student responses to Question 9: "Explain how testing accommodations help you to be successful on tests and quizzes."

<b>Response Type</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 16)</b>
Answer is specific and related to the accommodation student cited in question 8	9
Answer is vague or unclear	4
Answer is specific but <u>not</u> related to accommodation student cited in question 8	2
Student does not have testing accommodations in class in which survey was administered	1

The data in Table 7 show that the majority of students (11 out of 16) were able to explain, with some degree of detail, how their accommodations help them be successful. While the four students giving vague or unclear answers may not have been able to explain themselves accurately on the post-survey, they were each able to explain how the accommodations helped them when completing the testing

questionnaire immediately prior to taking a test. I believe this indicates that a few of my students have a hard time generalizing out of context (i.e., on a survey not associated with a testing event), but within the context of a testing session, are in fact able to speak to the effect of their accommodations. All 16 students were able to explain how these accommodations help them on the various administrations of the testing A&M questionnaire. A few particularly strong examples are highlighted below as Figures 1, 2 and 3.

What testing accommodations will you need to be successful on this test? (List at least 2 from your testing A&M page)

Stop to Theology Brake

Administer in location with Minimal distractions.

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How will these accommodations & modifications help you be successful on the test?

I will have time to think about what I am doing and it would be quite enough for me to get the test done.

Figure 1: Sofia's testing accommodations questionnaire from February, 2016.

What testing accommodations will you need to be successful on this test? (List at least 2 from your testing A&M page)

- ADMINISTER IN SMALL GROUP
- ADMINISTER IN LOCATION WITH MINIMAL DISTRACTIONS
- HIGHLIGHT KEY WORDS/PHRASES

How will these accommodations & modifications help you be successful on the test?

ONCE IM TO ABLE TO BREAKDOWN THE SENTENCE WITH HIGHLIGHTS ("KEY WORDS") AND IM IN A DIFFERENT SECTION OF THE ROOM I'D BE IN THE ZONE

Figure 2: Matthew's testing accommodations questionnaire from February, 2016.

In Figure 1, Sofia explains how testing accommodations give her enough time to finish in a quiet environment. It is evident that Sofia is developing her self-knowledge and self-awareness: she knows that she occasionally works slower than her peers and therefore needs extra time, she also understands the importance of having a quiet class environment in order for her to do her best work ("I will have time to think about what I am doing and it would be quite enough for me to get the test done"). In Figure 2, Matthew

explains how sitting in a separate part of the room and using a highlighter helps him focus on a test. His language is striking - he knows what he needs to get "in the zone" in order to be able to do his best work. In Figure 3, David acknowledges that reading comprehension is a struggle for him. In order to do his best on math tests and quizzes, he needs to make sure he is correctly interpreting the question. Having the test read aloud to him helps him be successful.

What testing accommodations will you need to be successful on this test? (List at least 2 from your testing A&M page)

---

Read directions orally

---

Read entire test orally

---

---

How will these accommodations & modifications help you be successful on the test?

Because sometimes I read words that I don't

---

think that it said's.

---

Figure 3: David's testing accommodations questionnaire from March, 2016.

In all three of the above examples, students are able to identify specific testing accommodations and thoughtfully explain how those supports will help them do their best. This requires not only knowing what their accommodations are, but also being reflective and self-aware enough to know what challenges they typically face as a learner. This level of self-knowledge is an important step toward self-advocacy. Students need to understand what their accommodations are and why they matter in order to be able to request them as needed.

In both the pre- and post-surveys, I asked students to reflect on a time they asked for an accommodation. The results are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Survey Responses to Question 10: “Have you ever told a teacher about an accommodation that you needed? What happened?”

<b>Change in Response</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 11)</b>
Both No	5
No to Yes; Specific Instance; Positive Result	4
No to Yes; Specific Instance; Negative Result	1
Both Yes	1

The data show that six out of 11 students have requested a specific accommodation from a teacher, mostly with positive results. Meanwhile, five students report that they have never asked for an accommodation during a test or quiz. This aligns with the observational data I recorded during the test administrations, as highlighted in Table 8A.

Table 8A: Observations of accommodations used by students in resource setting.

Action	Number of Occurrences
Students automatically receive an accommodation, such as small group setting, test read aloud, open notes, extended time	43
Students use one of the accommodations they identified on their questionnaire	46
Students verbally request an accommodation	12

Table 8A includes data from five test administrations for the 16 students in my resource math and science classes. The data show that students benefit from having a teacher pre-plan for testing accommodations, as they are able to access those supports without necessarily being aware of them. Encouragingly, student awareness of the supports they receive has increased, as many of them cited specific accommodations they knew they would use. However, the element of self-advocacy is still an area of concern. Out of the five testing administrations recorded, there were only 12 instances of a student requesting an accommodation, such as a stop-the-clock break, the use of a highlighter, or to have a question re-read. Students need additional encouragement and reminders to request the accommodations that are available to them. This is particularly important to address if students are to transfer this skill into the inclusion/general education settings. It's one thing to ask the resource teacher, who has taught you about your accommodations, for an accommodation. It's quite another thing to ask a general education teacher, who may never have spoken to you about your IEP, for something that the rest of the class is not getting. From conversations with my students, I know that students can now identify accommodations they have used in those settings, such

as testing in a separate room for inclusion math or having a Spanish test read aloud to them by the teacher, but would they push for those supports if the teacher wasn't already providing them? An important next step here is to balance additional prompting for students to request accommodations with support in other settings, such as visual reminders on tests and quizzes to ask for accommodations. Additional practice requesting accommodations should also increase student confidence, so that they are more likely to ask for supports as needed over time.

#### 4. Student knowledge of IEP goals

Elementary school students are familiar with goal-setting language, however, many students with disabilities are not aware of their specific IEP goals. Knowing what their IEP goals are is crucially important for student motivation in terms of classwork and homework completion, as it impacts their promotion to the next grade, their chances of transitioning to a less restrictive environment, and their grades. In the past, my experience has been that teachers create goals and progress monitor them with little to no communication with students about what the goals are or how they are doing on them. In an attempt to pull back the curtain on this practice, I instituted the following practices with my math and science resource classes.

At the beginning of each quarter (Q1, Q2 & Q3), I met 1-on-1 with each student in my math and science resource classes. For Q2 and Q3, I started by asking the student to reflect on their progress for their previous quarterly goal. In many cases, I would ask students to tell me what evidence they could share of making progress on that goal (i.e., are you showing this in your classwork? your homework? on tests?). I

then shared with them my notes from progress monitoring and let them know whether or not I believed they had met that goal. Then I would share with them their next quarterly goal. I'd ask them to come up with a plan for meeting that goal or identify support they might need from me to be successful. Students in my math class pasted a copy of their goal, and wrote their reflection/plan in their math notebook. For both groups, I kept a document where I recorded my notes and theirs.

Before getting into the specific details of IEP goals, it is important that students know in which subject areas they actually have goals. I asked this on both the pre- and post-survey. Results are shown in Table 9. (Note: If a student over-identified, for example, said they had a social work goal when in fact they only have social work accommodations, I did not count that as an incorrect answer. I only counted incorrect if they did not identify an area in which they do in fact have a goal.)

Table 9: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Survey Responses to Question 5: "In what subjects do you have IEP goals?"

<b>Change in Response</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 16)</b>
Demonstrated increased knowledge of goal areas	6
Knowledge of goal areas did not change, was 100% correct	5
Knowledge of goal areas did not change, less than 100% correct	2
Knowledge of goal areas decreased	3

The data in Table 9 show that five out of 16 students knew their goal areas well all along, while six students increased their knowledge of their goal areas. Two students did not show improvement over time, while three students actually demonstrated poorer

knowledge of their goal areas on the post-survey. I think there are a few reasons for this inconsistency. One is that I was not collaborating with my fellow special education teachers on the methods I used to educate students about their IEP goals. I see this as a significant missed opportunity, which I hope to rectify next year. While students discussed their IEP goals with a teacher in preparation for their annual meeting, the kind of ongoing, quarterly conversations around goal progress were not consistent across settings. This may have led students to falsely believe that they did not in fact have IEP goals in certain classes, because those teachers were not referring to the goals as regularly.

Another reason why students may not have demonstrated strong knowledge of their goal areas on the post-survey was that they had no documentation in front of them to use as a resource. It would probably be beneficial to students to have access to a paper copy of their IEP in at least one of their classrooms, so that they may refer to it as needed. Finally, some students did not identify goal areas for subjects for which they are in the inclusion setting. This goes back to a need to better clarify the difference between resource and inclusion, as well as the difference between IEP goals and A&M. Students may falsely believe that they do not have goals in a subject for which they are included in general education, or they may believe they have IEP goals for a subject in which they actually only have A&M.

Once students are aware of which subjects they have IEP goals, it is important for them to know what those specific goals are. I asked students to identify one IEP goal in both the pre- and post- survey. I re-worded the question to try to elicit more specific answers. The pre-survey question was “Describe one of your current IEP goals.” For the post-survey, I revised this to “What is one of your current IEP goals?” For this data set, I collected data from 14 students (n=14), as there were two students who did not complete the pre-survey. The changes in student responses are shown in Table 10.

Table 10: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Survey Responses to Question 6: “What is one of your current IEP goals?”

<b>Change in Response</b>	<b>Math Students</b>	<b>Science Students</b>	<b>Total Students (out of 14)</b>
Both responses specific to IEP goal	4	0	4
Improved answer from don't know or non-specific to specific and related to IEP goal	1	1	2
Improved answer from don't know to academic but <u>not</u> related to IEP goal	0	4	4
Both responses academic but <u>not</u> related to IEP goal	0	4	4

Based on the data in Table 10, only two students showed an improvement in the specificity of their responses, while another 8 students were still giving vague, academic answers. A few sample student responses from the post-survey show that many students still did not understand the difference between an academic or personal goal and an IEP goal:

- Thomas: “To improve at reading”

- Lucia: “For me to get good grades and behave”

Math students had access to their Q1 goals in their notebooks while completing the survey. Thus, the students in the math class are broken out as a subgroup - I expected their answers to be more specific/accurate than the science students. This can be seen in their responses:

- Andres: “To write 4 step problems”
- Santiago: “Work on my division”

Areas of opportunity for future work would be to ensure that all students have a place at hand where the exact language of their IEP goals is written, working with students to paraphrase their goal into their own words to enhance their practical understanding of the goal, and having further discussions with students about the difference between an academic or personal goal and an IEP goal.

I wanted to see how students understood and measured progress towards their IEP goals. I have seen different models from this among my colleagues, such as tracking forms where students record their scores on weekly quizzes and binders where students place work samples related to their goal. While I did not set out a specific expectation for the format of this tracking, I wanted to see if students were linking these practices to their IEP goal, or simply completing a task the teacher asked them to do, without reflecting on why they might need to do it. I changed the wording slightly from the pre- to post-survey in order to coach students towards thinking about what practices they might already be doing to monitor progress. On the pre-survey, I asked “How do you track your own progress toward your IEP goals?” On the post-survey, I changed the question to “Describe how your special education teacher(s) help you know how you are

doing on your IEP goals.” Ultimately, I would like to move towards more student-directed progress monitoring, but I think that some of the other practices need to be in place before students will be equipped to do so. The data from the pre- and post-survey are summarized in Table 11. I have data from 15 students (n=15), because one student did not complete the pre-survey.

Table 11: Responses to post-survey Question 7: “Describe how your special education teacher(s) help you know how you are doing on your IEP goals.”

<b>Change in Response</b>	<b>Number of Students (out of 15)</b>
Don't know or unrelated answer to answer specific to IEP goal tracking	9
Both answers specific to IEP goal tracking	3
Both answers unrelated to IEP goal tracking	2
Pre-survey answer specific but post-survey answer unrelated	1

The data in Table 11 show that students were able to recognize progress-monitoring support when it was specifically explained to them and conducted regularly over time. 12 out of 15 students could refer to a specific form of progress monitoring that they did with their teacher. Some student quotes illustrate the variety of practices students understood to be relevant to their IEP goals:

- Camila: “When we meet 1-on-1 in math”
- Santiago: “Ms. N pushes me to meet my goal and [gives] feedback [on] my HW”
- Alejandro: “[The social worker] was talk[ing] about how [I’m] feeling [in] social work”

- Isabella: “[My reading teacher] helps me check my comprehension”

It is particularly encouraging that students who started off with academic answers unrelated to their IEP goal (such as checking grades, doing homework, or trying my best), were able by the post-survey to give answers that were specific to IEP progress monitoring. This speaks to the importance of naming IEP goal work and highlighting student progress towards it on an ongoing basis.

The method that I chose to help students monitor progress was to meet with them at the end of each quarter to reflect on their goal progress and discuss their next quarterly benchmark. During these meetings, I first asked students to reflect on how they thought they were doing on their IEP goal(s). Whether or not their self-assessment of progress matched my assessment of their progress is highlighted in Table 12, as well as whether or not I determined that they were making adequate progress on their goal.

Table 12: Comparison of student and teacher assessment of goal progress for Q1 and Q2.

	End of Q1			End of Q2		
	Student met goal	Student did not meet goal	Total	Student met goal	Student did not meet goal	Total
Student self-assessment of goal progress <b>matched</b> teacher's assessment	14	1	15	15	5	20
Student self-assessment of goal progress <b>did not match</b> teacher's assessment	3	6	9	2	4	6
Total	17	7	24	17	9	26

It is encouraging to see that the majority of students are able to reflect honestly on their IEP progress, to the extent that it matches my interpretation of whether or not they met their goal. At the end of Q1, students' self-assessments matched mine in 15 out of 24 cases. At the end of Q2, this improved to 20 out of 26 cases. I think this speaks to two things: most of my students are meeting their goals and students are hearing me speak about their goals more often. Students are more likely to be accurate in their self-assessment if they have met their goals. Some quotes from students illustrate this:

- "Lucia said she felt good about her life-cycle diagram and understood it."
- "Sofia thinks she knows the words for the vocabulary. She feels like it's going well."

Students who aren't meeting their goals are more likely to have a false sense that they are doing well. This is evident in the fact that six out of nine students in Q1 and four out of six students in Q2 whose assessments did not match mine were not in fact meeting their goals. It seems that the default is to say "I'm doing great at this!" without any real evidence to support that feeling. I am trying to push students to support their assertions with evidence, prompting them with questions such as, What are you basing this on: homework, small group work with me, and/or quizzes? When students are able to identify how they are tracking their progress, they are more likely to be accurate. For example, when pushed to give evidence, students were able to give the following responses:

- Camila says, "[I am] doing good on group [but] not so good on homework."
- David says, "I'm struggling a little bit with all the steps."

Students who cannot give specific evidence of work that shows their progress are more likely to think they are doing well when they are not. This suggests that an additional intervention should be to help students do more progress-monitoring of their goals. I currently have students in my math class track their homework completion and accuracy. For third quarter, I have started to further specify their accuracy rates for 6th-grade-level homework and for IEP goal-based homework. This should help them see if they are making adequate progress toward their IEP goals. However, I believe there is more to be done in this area, such as having students record their progress-monitoring data rather than me recording it. It will also be helpful to collaborate with other special education teachers on tools for students to conduct their own progress monitoring, so that students become more aware of and in control of their attainment of IEP benchmarks in their various classes.

### **Implications for future study**

There are aspects of an IEP that I was unable to address in the scope of this study. In order to build a more robust picture of student involvement in the entire IEP, I would want to study interventions related to classroom accommodations and modifications, use of accommodations and modifications in various settings, criteria for transition to a less restrictive environment, student progress monitoring, and promotion criteria.

I envision using a similar approach for classroom A&M that I used with testing A&M: give students a copy of the relevant page of the IEP, teach them what each term means, help them identify when the accommodation is being given to them

automatically, and strategize with them about how to ask for an accommodation they need. In terms of using A&M in different settings, this would require some collaboration from other teachers. I would be able to track student use of classroom and testing A&M in the inclusion settings in which I serve students, but I would also want to see how often they request these supports in general education classes for which they have A&M only (i.e., there is no special education teacher present). This could be challenging, as it would rely on a general education teacher keeping data, but it could be very informative, when combined with student reflection, about the unique challenges of student self-advocacy in a non-special education setting.

Student understanding of the various levels of special education support (A&M only, inclusion, resource) would be a high priority for a future study. Students need to understand their current placement, what justification has been provided for that placement, and what criteria they must meet in order to change placements. In general, we seek to move students to less restrictive environments. However, it is also important that students have some input on a decision to place them in a more restrictive environment. A decision like this should not be done to the student, but with the student. This practice ought to lead towards increased student self-monitoring of progress towards IEP goals and criteria for transition, and could facilitate a student advocating for a placement change and IEP revision mid-year.

Criteria for promotion are often set by teachers without discussion with the student, and students are not always aware that their criteria for promotion differs from their peers. This is particularly important in benchmark years (grades 3, 6 and 8). Students need to be involved in deciding which standard criteria (grades, test scores)

are appropriate goals for them, and which need to be modified. This again ties back to progress monitoring IEP goals; if a student is to be promoted based on IEP goal progress and not a standardized test score, they need to know where to place their effort and emphasis.

Finally, I would be interested in tracking changes in students over time as they participate in their IEP process. How might student self-awareness and self-advocacy change for a student who has worked through these interventions for 3 or 4 years? What impact could that have on their academic achievement and social-emotional health in high school and beyond?

### **Conclusion**

Based on my data, it is clear that, after conducting the interventions described above, students have a better understanding of the definition of an IEP and the purpose of an IEP meeting, and are better equipped to participate as a member of the IEP team. Students still need more instruction on their disability and how it may affect their academic progress and social interactions. Students may continue to feel shy or nervous at their meetings, but their ability to participate in the meeting – sharing strengths and needs, discussing current placement, addressing learning preferences – is likely to improve with repeated participation. This suggests that students ought to be invited to participate as soon as possible, perhaps in 5<sup>th</sup> grade or earlier. In addition, the special education teacher's expectation of the level of student participation in the IEP meeting should be differentiated by age, grade, experience, and cognitive ability. All students with IEPs can contribute to their meeting in a meaningful way, but that

contribution should look different depending on the individual student. The adults who sit on the IEP team need to continue to monitor their own approaches during the meeting, and may require some additional professional development in order to best facilitate student participation and leave room for student voice at the table.

In terms of ongoing implementation of the IEP, students showed improved understanding of their placement (LRE), their accommodations and modifications, and their IEP goals. Additional instruction and clarity around the decision to place students in resource or inclusion, as well as the criteria by which students may change settings, should be a next step. Increased student self-knowledge about LRE leads to increased student self-advocacy for a placement change. When students know their assessment A&M, they are more likely to use or ask for a specific accommodation during a test. Additionally, they can explain how those accommodations will help them be successful. This will be an important stepping-stone towards increasing student empowerment to request accommodations in the general education setting. Finally, as students better understand their IEP goals, they are more likely to be self-reflective in a way that aligns to the teacher's evaluation of progress towards IEP goals. Students need additional instruction in the difference between an IEP goal and a personal or academic goal, as well as easy access to their full IEP document at all times. Increased collaboration among special education teachers will support students in developing strategies to monitor their progress towards their IEP goals.

In summary, when students are provided with direct instruction about their IEP, are given a seat at the table for their annual meeting, and participate in ongoing reflection and self-assessment, they are empowered with greater self-awareness and

the tools for self-advocacy. Given the life-long positive outcomes associated with self-advocacy skills, all students with special needs can greatly benefit from increased instruction about and involvement in their IEP.

The success of this project depended greatly on the collaboration of other adults involved with IEPs. Their response was overwhelmingly positive, as shown in the quotes below:

- “I have noticed students self advocating and feeling comfortable justifying their A&M. For example, once a student was listening to music while working independently, and another student questioned whether this was fair. He calmly replied, "this is in my IEP--listening to music helps me focus so it's something I'm allowed to do sometimes." I thought that was awesome.” – Special Education Teacher
- “It has been great to see students take more ownership of participating in their IEP meetings, and contributing information and sharing about their strengths and weaknesses. I feel that they benefit from the feedback in knowing where they are functioning.” – School Psychologist
- “I became more aware of my wordage within an IEP wanting to state things more in a positive light (i.e. How to phrase when a student is performing multiple grade levels behind). When an LRE change takes place students showed more motivation and had a better understanding of why it was occurring.” – Special Education Teacher
- “The student that I teach...was very knowledgeable about his IEP and his weaknesses. He is well aware of how to advocate for himself [because] he does

it quite often in my class. I don't see how it would hurt having the kids start to attend IEPs at an earlier age.” – General Education Teacher

- “The information I share hasn't changed but the WAY I share it has for sure. It has really made me think more about how I communicate the negatives about a student. It has made me focus a lot more on the positives and the ways they have grown, since I want the student to hear those things and hold on to them as motivation.” – Special Education Teacher

### **Policy recommendations**

Classroom level: I intend to continue the practices I began this year: teaching students about their accommodations, preparing students for their IEP meetings, and involving students in conversations about their IEP goals. I will improve these practices by ensuring student access to their full IEP document in the resource setting, teaching students about their classroom accommodations, and continuing to collaborate with my colleagues so that the students we share receive these supports across a their various educational settings.

School level: My school has set a policy of inviting students in 6th and 7th grade to their IEP meetings, meeting with them in advance to help them prepare, and including student input in the IEP document. Special education teachers have committed to this level of support. A next step will be to add the other components (such as instruction on A&M and IEP goals) so that all middle-school students with IEPs receive the same instruction and support. For the near future, I anticipate that we will

extend our practices to 5th grade, and continue conversations about what student involvement in younger grades might look like.

District level: I will be co-leading a CFE study group on student involvement in IEPs this year with teachers from around the district. This could be a powerful tool for spreading these practices and collecting data about their impact in different settings. Teams of teachers collaborating on designing and implementing strategies for increasing student involvement would be a best practice across the district. In addition to the study group, network- or district-wide professional learning communities could be convened to learn and implement these practices.

State & national level: The next authorization of IDEA ought to specifically address student participation in the IEP meetings and decisions, not simply require their presence at age 14 ½. The long-term benefits of self-knowledge and self-advocacy, particularly for students with disabilities, have been well-researched. The professionals who work with students with disabilities ought to be required to demonstrate evidence of student engagement with the decisions made in each annual IEP. At the state level (because IEPs vary so greatly from state to state), this could look like required sections in the eIEP that must reflect student voice.

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## Appendix A: IEP pre-survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### IEP Survey

Directions: Answer each question to the best of your ability. Please take your best guess even if you are not quite sure what a question means.

1. What is an IEP?
2. Why do you have an IEP?
3. What happens at an IEP meeting?
4. Have you been to an IEP meeting? If yes, describe how you felt:
5. In what subjects do you have IEP goals (check all that apply)?
  - Language & Literature (Reading/Writing)
  
  - Math
  
  - Individuals & Societies (Social Studies)
  
  - Science
  
  - Speech
  
  - Social Work
  
  - Independent Functioning
  
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Describe one of your current IEP goals:
7. How do you track your own progress toward your IEP goals?
8. What is the difference between a resource and an inclusion class?
9. Give an example of a resource class/teacher:
10. Give an example of an inclusion class/teacher:
11. Name a subject that you may soon move from resource into inclusion for. Explain what you're doing to make that transition. (If you recently moved from resource to inclusion for a subject, you can describe that.)
12. Give an example of a classroom accommodation or modification that you have:
13. Give an example of a testing accommodation or modification that you have:
14. Have you ever told a teacher about an accommodation that you needed? What happened?
15. Any additional comments or questions for me about your IEP or this survey?

## Appendix B: IEP observation log

### **IEP Observation Log**

Name:

Date:

#### Student Leadership Steps

- 1=introduce self
- 2=introduce IEP team members
- 3=state purpose of meeting
- 4=review past goals and progress
- 5=ask for feedback
- 6=ask questions if didn't understand
- 7=deal with differences in opinion
- 8=state needed support
- 9=express interest
- 10=express skills and limits
- 11=express opinions and goals
- 12=close meeting by thanking everyone

Notes:

Observations of Student During Meeting/Quotes:

Observations of Adults During Meeting/Quotes:

**Appendix C: Testing A&M questionnaire**

**Testing A&M Questionnaire**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

What testing accommodations will you need to be successful on this test? (List at least 2 from your testing A&M page)

How will these accommodations & modifications help you be successful on the test?

## Appendix D: IEP post-survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **IEP Survey**

Directions: Answer each question to the best of your ability. Please take your best guess even if you are not quite sure what a question means.

1. What is an IEP?
2. Why do you have an IEP?
3. What happens at an IEP meeting?
4. Have you been to an IEP meeting (circle one)? Yes                      No
  - a. If yes, describe what you said at the meeting:
  - b. If yes, describe how you felt at the meeting:
5. In what subjects do you have IEP goals (check all that apply)?
  - Language & Literature (Reading/Writing)
  - Math
  - Individuals & Societies (Social Studies)
  - Science
  - Speech
  - Social Work
  - Independent Functioning
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is one of your current IEP goals?
7. Describe how your special education teacher(s) help you know how you are doing on your IEP goals:
8. Give an example of a testing accommodation or modification that you have:
9. Explain how testing accommodations help you to be successful on tests and quizzes:
10. Have you ever told a teacher about an accommodation that you needed? What happened?
11. Any additional comments or questions for me about your IEP or this survey?