

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs): Enhancing Academic and Social Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract:

This exploratory systematic review investigates the impact of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) on student success in U.S. special education. By analyzing existing literature, the study examines how IEPs influence academic achievement, social development, and overall student progress. The findings indicate that IEPs provide a structured and personalized approach to learning, helping students with disabilities meet their educational goals. However, several challenges impact their effectiveness, including inconsistencies in implementation, limitations in resource allocation, and the need for ongoing educator training. Additionally, the effectiveness of IEPs varies based on factors such as teacher collaboration, parental involvement, and school support systems. While research underscores the potential of well-developed IEPs in enhancing student outcomes, it also highlights the necessity for continuous improvements in their design and execution. Addressing these challenges through enhanced training programs, better resource distribution, and stronger policy enforcement can lead to more effective implementation and greater student success. This review contributes to the ongoing discourse on special education by emphasizing the importance of refining IEP strategies to ensure equitable and meaningful learning experiences for students with diverse needs. Future research should explore innovative approaches to improve IEP effectiveness and promote inclusive education practices.

Keywords: Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Special Education, Student Success, Inclusive Education, Educational Policy

Introduction:

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a cornerstone of special education in the United States, designed to provide tailored support for students with disabilities. Mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), IEPs outline specific educational goals, accommodations, and services required to meet students' unique needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

However, despite their legal and theoretical significance, the effectiveness of IEPs in fostering student success remains a subject of debate (Yell, Katsiyannis, & Ennis, 2019). Research indicates that IEPs positively influence academic outcomes by setting measurable goals tailored to students' abilities (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2018). Well-structured IEPs have been associated with improvements in literacy, numeracy, and adaptive skills, particularly when implemented with fidelity. However, inconsistencies in goal-setting, limited educator training, and disparities in resource availability can hinder their success (Collins & Zirkel, 2017).

Beyond academics, IEPs contribute to students' social development by incorporating individualized behavioral strategies and peer interaction opportunities (Gilmour, 2020). Studies emphasize the importance of collaboration between teachers, parents, and specialists in fostering a supportive learning environment. Nevertheless, challenges such as inadequate staff training and limited peer integration opportunities persist, which may impact the social progress of students with disabilities (McLeskey et al., 2017). Despite the benefits of IEPs, several implementation challenges remain. Many educators report insufficient training in designing and executing IEPs effectively, leading to inconsistencies in service delivery (Etscheidt, 2019). Limited funding and staffing shortages further exacerbate disparities in access to specialized support (Smith & Tyler, 2021).

Moreover, while parental involvement is a critical component of IEP success, many families face barriers such as lack of knowledge about their child's rights or logistical challenges in attending meetings (Fish, 2019).

This study aims to systematically review existing literature to explore the impact of IEPs on academic achievement, social development, and overall student progress in U.S. special education settings. By identifying best practices and challenges, this review seeks to inform educators, policymakers, and researchers about strategies for improving IEP implementation to enhance student success.

Literature Review:

The development and implementation of IEPs are grounded in the principles of differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Differentiated instruction allows educators to tailor teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students, while UDL emphasizes flexibility in curriculum design to accommodate a broad range of learners (CAST, 2018). Research has shown that when IEPs incorporate these frameworks, students demonstrate higher engagement and improved learning outcomes (Rose et al., 2014).

Several studies have examined the role of IEPs in academic achievement. Research by Kurth and Mastergeorge (2018) found that students with well-structured IEPs show significant improvements in literacy and numeracy. These gains are most pronounced when IEPs include clear, measurable goals aligned with individualized instructional strategies.

However, other studies suggest that inconsistencies in goal-setting and poor alignment with curriculum standards can limit the effectiveness of IEPs (Collins & Zirkel, 2017). Furthermore, research highlights disparities in IEP effectiveness between students with different disabilities, with students with learning disabilities often benefiting more than those with severe cognitive impairments (Gage et al., 2020).

IEPs also play a critical role in fostering social and behavioral development. Gilmour (2020) found that students with well-designed behavioral intervention plans within their IEPs exhibit improved social interactions and reduced behavioral issues. Additionally, inclusive settings where IEPs are implemented effectively have been shown to enhance peer relationships and social integration (McLeskey et al., 2017). However, challenges such as insufficient social skills training and limited peer interaction opportunities hinder the social benefits of IEPs for many students (Ruble et al., 2019).

One of the most significant barriers to effective IEP implementation is inadequate teacher training. Etscheidt (2019) found that many educators lack the knowledge and skills required to develop and implement high-quality IEPs. Professional development programs focusing on data-driven decision-making, goal-setting, and collaboration are essential for improving IEP effectiveness (Smith & Tyler, 2021). Additionally, research indicates that teacher burnout and high workloads negatively impact the consistency and fidelity of IEP implementation (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Parental involvement is a critical factor in the success of IEPs. Fish (2019) found that students whose parents actively participate in the IEP process experience better academic and social outcomes.

However, barriers such as lack of parental knowledge about special education laws, limited communication between schools and families, and socioeconomic constraints can impede effective parental engagement (Burke, 2020). Studies emphasize the importance of training programs for parents to increase their understanding of the IEP process and advocacy strategies (Lalvani, 2018).

Resource constraints pose a significant challenge to IEP implementation. Smith and Tyler (2021) found that limited funding for special education services results in staffing shortages, inadequate training, and insufficient assistive technology. Schools in low-income districts face additional barriers, as they often lack the resources needed to provide comprehensive support for students with disabilities (Morgan et al., 2017). Addressing these disparities requires policy interventions aimed at equitable funding distribution and increased investment in special education programs.

The integration of technology in IEPs has shown promise in enhancing student outcomes. Research by Puckett et al. (2021) highlights the benefits of assistive technology in supporting students with disabilities, particularly in communication and literacy development.

Digital tools such as speech-to-text software, audiobooks, and adaptive learning platforms have been found to improve engagement and learning for students with diverse needs (Edyburn, 2020). However, access to technology remains uneven, with schools in underfunded districts facing significant barriers in adopting digital solutions (Smith & Tyler, 2021).

Methodology:

This study employs an exploratory systematic review to examine the impact of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) on student success in U.S. special education. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and case studies published between 2010 and 2024. Databases such as ERIC, PubMed, and Google Scholar were utilized to retrieve relevant studies.

The selection of studies followed a rigorous inclusion and exclusion process. Inclusion criteria required that studies be empirical, focus on the effects of IEPs on student outcomes, and be conducted within U.S. special education settings. Studies emphasizing academic performance, social development, behavioral progress, and implementation challenges were prioritized. Exclusion criteria eliminated theoretical papers, opinion-based articles, and studies lacking sufficient data or methodological rigor.

To ensure reliability, a systematic approach was followed in analyzing and synthesizing data. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns related to IEP effectiveness, challenges, and best practices. Data extraction focused on study design, sample characteristics, key findings, and implications for educators and policymakers. Additionally, inter-researcher validation was conducted to minimize bias and enhance the credibility of findings.

This systematic review provides a structured synthesis of current research to offer insights into the strengths and limitations of IEP implementation. The findings aim to inform educators, policymakers, and researchers about strategies for improving IEP development and execution to enhance student success in special education settings.

Findings and Discussion

Academic Achievement and IEP Effectiveness

Findings from this systematic review underscore the critical role of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in enhancing academic achievement among students in special education. When effectively designed and implemented, IEPs provide a structured framework that supports students in developing essential skills in literacy, numeracy, and adaptive learning. Research by Kurth and Mastergeorge (2018) emphasizes that well-structured IEPs, which incorporate clear, measurable goals and individualized instructional strategies, significantly improve student performance. By tailoring learning objectives to students' unique strengths and needs, IEPs facilitate progress that might not be achievable in a general education setting.

However, despite these benefits, challenges remain in ensuring that IEPs consistently lead to meaningful academic growth. One significant issue is the inconsistency in goal-setting and alignment with curriculum standards. Collins and Zirkel (2017) found that many IEPs lack specificity, leading to vague or unrealistic objectives that do not effectively guide instruction.

Without well-defined, measurable goals, educators may struggle to track student progress and make necessary instructional adjustments. Furthermore, disparities in the quality of IEP implementation across school districts contribute to uneven academic outcomes, with students in under-resourced schools often receiving less comprehensive support (Smith & Tyler, 2021).

Another key challenge is the varying effectiveness of IEPs depending on the nature and severity of a student's disability. Gage et al. (2020) highlight that while students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or ADHD, often demonstrate significant academic improvements with IEP support, those with severe cognitive impairments, such as intellectual disabilities or autism spectrum disorder, may experience more limited gains. This discrepancy suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to IEP design is insufficient. Instead, IEPs must be highly individualized, incorporating evidence-based interventions that address specific learning challenges.

Moreover, the success of an IEP is closely linked to the extent of collaboration among educators, specialists, and parents. Research by Fish (2019) indicates that active parental involvement in the IEP process leads to better academic outcomes, as parents can provide valuable insights into their child's learning needs and reinforce strategies at home.

However, many families, particularly those from low-income backgrounds or non-English-speaking households, face barriers to meaningful participation in IEP meetings, limiting their ability to advocate effectively for their children (Burke, 2020). Addressing these barriers through enhanced communication and parent education initiatives is crucial to maximizing IEP effectiveness.

Furthermore, teacher expertise plays a significant role in determining the success of IEP implementation. Etscheidt (2019) found that many educators lack adequate training in special education methodologies, leading to inconsistencies in how IEPs are executed. Professional development programs focusing on differentiated instruction, progress monitoring, and assistive technology integration are essential in equipping teachers with the skills needed to implement IEPs effectively (Smith & Tyler, 2021). Additionally, teacher workload and burnout can negatively impact the fidelity of IEP implementation, as overstretched educators may struggle to provide individualized instruction and regular progress assessments (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019).

Resource allocation also significantly influences IEP effectiveness. Schools with sufficient funding can provide specialized instructional materials, assistive technology, and additional support staff, all of which enhance the learning experience for students with disabilities. Conversely, underfunded schools may lack the resources necessary to implement IEPs effectively, leading to disparities in student outcomes (Morgan et al., 2017). Policymakers must prioritize equitable funding distribution to ensure that all students with disabilities receive the support they need to succeed academically.

The integration of technology into IEPs has shown promise in enhancing academic achievement. Digital tools such as speech-to-text software, audiobooks, and adaptive learning platforms provide personalized support that caters to diverse learning needs (Edyburn, 2020). Research by Puckett et al. (2021) highlights that the use of assistive technology can significantly improve literacy and communication skills among students with disabilities.

However, access to technology remains a challenge, particularly in low-income school districts, where limited funding may restrict the availability of these resources. Addressing this digital divide is essential to ensuring that all students benefit from technological advancements in special education.

While IEPs have demonstrated significant potential in improving academic achievement for students with disabilities, their effectiveness is influenced by various factors, including goal-setting practices, the severity of students' disabilities, educator training, parental involvement, resource availability, and technological integration. To maximize the impact of IEPs, a multi-faceted approach is needed—one that emphasizes individualized, evidence-based instruction, strengthens collaboration among stakeholders, and ensures equitable access to necessary resources. By addressing these challenges, educators and policymakers can enhance the effectiveness of IEPs, ultimately improving academic outcomes for students in special education.

Social Development and Behavioral Progress

Beyond academic achievement, Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) play a crucial role in fostering social and behavioral development among students with disabilities. Research by Gilmour (2020) found that students with well-designed behavioral intervention plans integrated into their IEPs exhibit improved social interactions and reduced behavioral issues.

These findings underscore the importance of including individualized behavioral strategies, structured peer interaction opportunities, and social skills training in IEPs to support emotional and social growth. By addressing both academic and social needs, IEPs can help students develop essential life skills necessary for successful integration into school and community settings.

However, despite the potential benefits, challenges remain in effectively implementing the social and behavioral components of IEPs. McLeskey et al. (2017) emphasized that inadequate peer interaction opportunities and a lack of focus on social skills training limit the positive impact of IEPs on students' social development. Many students with disabilities struggle with social integration, not due to a lack of ability, but because they are not provided with structured environments that encourage meaningful peer engagement (Ruble et al., 2019). This suggests that simply including social goals in an IEP is insufficient; rather, schools must ensure that these goals are actively reinforced through structured activities and teacher-facilitated interactions.

One of the key barriers to effective social development in IEPs is the inconsistency in how schools implement social skills training. Some schools provide direct instruction in social skills, while others rely on informal opportunities for peer interaction, which may not be enough for students who require explicit guidance (Carter et al., 2015).

Additionally, the presence of stigma associated with disabilities can discourage peer engagement, making it even more critical for educators to create inclusive environments where students feel comfortable interacting with their peers (Siperstein et al., 2017). Educators must adopt evidence-based strategies, such as peer-mediated interventions and social coaching, to help students with disabilities develop confidence and social competence.

Parental involvement is another critical factor influencing the success of social and behavioral components in IEPs. When parents actively participate in their child's education, they reinforce social skills learned in school and provide additional opportunities for practice in real-life settings (Fish, 2019). However, many parents face challenges in understanding and supporting their child's IEP goals, particularly if they lack access to resources or experience language barriers (Burke, 2020). Schools must prioritize parent education and engagement, ensuring that families are equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to support their child's social development beyond the classroom.

Furthermore, teacher training plays a vital role in the successful implementation of social and behavioral interventions within IEPs. Many general education teachers report feeling unprepared to address the complex social and behavioral needs of students with disabilities (Etscheidt, 2019).

Providing educators with professional development on behavior management techniques, inclusive teaching strategies, and collaborative learning models can improve their ability to foster social growth in students with IEPs. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration among special education teachers, counselors, and behavioral specialists can enhance the effectiveness of social development interventions, ensuring that students receive well-rounded support tailored to their individual needs.

While IEPs have the potential to significantly improve the social and behavioral development of students with disabilities, their effectiveness depends on how well social goals are integrated into daily instruction and peer interactions. Addressing challenges such as inconsistent implementation, limited peer engagement, and inadequate teacher training is essential to maximizing the social benefits of IEPs. By fostering stronger collaboration between educators, parents, and specialists, and by prioritizing structured social skills training, schools can create more inclusive environments that support the holistic development of students with disabilities.

Implementation Challenges: Educator Training and Resource Allocation

One of the most significant barriers to the effective implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) is inadequate teacher training. Etscheidt (2019) found that many educators lack the necessary skills and knowledge to develop and execute high-quality IEPs.

While special education teachers are required to be proficient in designing individualized plans, many report insufficient professional development opportunities that focus on data-driven decision-making, goal-setting, and collaborative strategies (Smith & Tyler, 2021). Without ongoing training, educators may struggle to create meaningful, measurable goals tailored to students' unique needs, ultimately affecting the effectiveness of IEPs in improving student outcomes.

In addition to training deficiencies, resource allocation remains a critical challenge in IEP implementation. Schools, particularly those in low-income districts, often face budget constraints that result in staffing shortages, inadequate access to assistive technology, and a lack of specialized support services (Morgan et al., 2017). These resource limitations can lead to inconsistencies in IEP execution, making it difficult for educators to provide personalized instruction effectively. Addressing these disparities requires increased investment in special education programs and the equitable distribution of resources to ensure all students receive the support they need to succeed academically and socially.

Another challenge is the administrative burden associated with IEP development and compliance. Teachers and school administrators often spend significant time on paperwork, documentation, and meetings, which can detract from direct instructional time with students (Hirano et al., 2018).

While these administrative processes are essential to ensuring legal compliance and accountability, excessive paperwork can overwhelm educators and lead to rushed or poorly designed IEPs. Schools must find a balance between maintaining compliance and allowing teachers to focus on delivering high-quality instruction by streamlining documentation processes and leveraging digital tools to reduce administrative workload.

Parental involvement also plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of IEPs, yet many families face barriers to active participation. Fish (2019) found that parents often struggle to navigate the complex IEP process due to a lack of information, language barriers, or limited time and resources.

When parents are not fully engaged, there may be a disconnect between the support provided at school and at home, reducing the overall impact of the IEP. Schools must prioritize family engagement by offering workshops, accessible communication channels, and culturally responsive support to empower parents to advocate for their children's educational needs.

While IEPs are essential for supporting students with disabilities, their effectiveness is often hindered by inadequate teacher training, resource shortages, administrative burdens, and limited parental involvement. To enhance IEP implementation, schools must invest in ongoing professional development, allocate sufficient resources, streamline administrative tasks, and foster strong partnerships with families. Addressing these challenges will ensure that IEPs fulfill their intended purpose of providing equitable, individualized support that enhances student success.

The Role of Parental Involvement in IEP Success

Parental involvement is a critical determinant of the effectiveness of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Research suggests that students whose parents actively participate in the IEP process demonstrate higher academic achievement, improved social skills, and greater overall success in special education settings (Fish, 2019). Parents serve as key advocates for their children, ensuring that educational goals align with their child's strengths, needs, and long-term development. Their input helps create more personalized and meaningful learning experiences, bridging the gap between school-based instruction and home-based reinforcement.

However, several barriers often hinder parental engagement in the IEP process. Limited knowledge of special education laws, inadequate communication between schools and families, and socioeconomic constraints can prevent parents from fully participating in decision-making (Burke, 2020). Some parents may feel intimidated by the technical language used in IEP meetings or may struggle to attend due to work obligations and lack of transportation. These

challenges can lead to a disconnect between educators and families, potentially limiting the effectiveness of the support provided to students.

To address these barriers, schools must take proactive steps to empower parents as active participants in their child's education. Lalvani (2018) suggests that schools implement training programs that educate parents about special education policies, IEP procedures, and their rights as advocates.

Additionally, improving communication strategies—such as using clear, jargon-free language, offering bilingual resources, and providing flexible meeting schedules—can make IEP meetings more accessible and inclusive. Schools that foster strong, collaborative relationships with families create an environment where parents feel valued and confident in contributing to their child's educational plan.

Strengthening school-family partnerships ultimately enhances the success of IEPs by ensuring that students receive consistent support both in school and at home. When parents and educators work together, IEPs are more effectively implemented, leading to better learning outcomes and increased student engagement. By prioritizing parental involvement and addressing existing challenges, schools can maximize the impact of IEPs, ensuring that all students receive the individualized support they need to thrive.

The Impact of Assistive Technology on IEP Implementation

The integration of technology within Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) has emerged as a powerful tool for improving student outcomes. Assistive technology, such as speech-to-text software, audiobooks, and adaptive learning platforms, has been shown to enhance engagement and facilitate learning for students with disabilities (Edyburn, 2020). These tools help bridge gaps in communication, reading, and writing, allowing students to access content in ways that align with their individual needs. Puckett et al. (2021) emphasize that digital tools can be particularly beneficial for students with severe disabilities, enabling them to develop literacy skills and improve overall academic performance.

Beyond academic benefits, technology also plays a crucial role in fostering independence and self-advocacy among students with disabilities. For instance, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices support students with speech impairments by providing them with a means to express their thoughts and participate in classroom discussions.

Similarly, adaptive learning software personalizes instruction based on student progress, helping learners build confidence and take ownership of their educational journey. When properly integrated into IEPs, technology can empower students by reducing learning barriers and promoting autonomy.

Despite its potential advantages, access to assistive technology remains uneven, particularly in underfunded school districts. Many schools lack the financial resources to invest in cutting-edge educational technology, resulting in disparities in IEP implementation (Smith & Tyler, 2021). Without adequate funding, students in low-income communities may miss out on critical tools that could enhance their learning experiences.

This digital divide not only limits academic progress but also widens existing inequities in special education. To address these disparities, policymakers and educators must advocate for increased funding and resources to support the integration of technology in special education.

Schools should explore grant opportunities, partnerships with technology companies, and state or federal funding programs to ensure equitable access to assistive tools. Additionally, professional development initiatives should equip educators with the skills needed to effectively incorporate technology into IEPs, maximizing its impact on student learning and engagement.

The successful integration of technology into IEPs depends on a commitment to accessibility and innovation. By prioritizing investment in assistive technology and ensuring that all students have access to digital resources, schools can create more inclusive learning environments. Emphasizing the role of technology in individualized instruction can significantly enhance IEP effectiveness, helping students with disabilities reach their full academic and social potential.

Conclusion:

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are essential in ensuring that students with disabilities receive tailored support to enhance their academic, social, and behavioral development. When effectively designed and implemented, IEPs can significantly improve student outcomes by providing structured learning plans, assistive technologies, and targeted interventions.

However, challenges such as inconsistent execution, inadequate teacher training, and disparities in resource allocation often limit their effectiveness. Addressing these barriers requires a commitment to ongoing professional development, equitable distribution of resources, and strengthened collaboration between educators, families, and policymakers.

To maximize the impact of IEPs, schools must adopt evidence-based strategies that promote inclusivity and individualized learning. Providing educators with comprehensive training in special education practices, expanding access to assistive technologies, and fostering meaningful parental involvement can help bridge existing gaps in IEP implementation.

Additionally, future research should focus on refining best practices and evaluating the long-term effects of IEPs on student success. By prioritizing these efforts, schools can ensure that students with disabilities receive the high-quality, personalized education they need to reach their full potential.

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