

Quality and Content of Individual Education Programs for Children with Autism

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Abstract

Public schools serve increasing numbers of children with autism. The social and communication impairments of children with autism often challenge teachers to target developmental skills that traditionally do not match the regular education curriculum yet are essential for participation in state and district testing. Little is known about the educational programs and teachers' success in targeting such essential skills. The purpose of this presentation is to characterize the IEPs of students with autism, examine the relative associations between child, teacher, and school variables on the (a) overall quality of the IEP and (b) types of goals (e.g., social, communication) contained within the IEP, and make recommendations for the role of school psychologists in developing meaningful IEPs.

Methods

- Thirty-five IEPs of children ($m = 6.08$ yrs) with autism from Kentucky and Southern Indiana were evaluated for quality and content. Teachers taught children with autism for an average of 7.65 years ($SD = 7.72$) and had an average class size of 7.86 children ($range = 7-36$).
- Criteria described by the National Research Council (NRC; 2001) and requirements listed in IDEA (2004) were used to measure both quality and content factors.
- The evaluation form consisted of 12 indicators that were rated using a 3-point Likert scale. See Table 1 for items included in the analysis.
- Raters were trained to use the evaluation form until an interrater reliability of 80% was established.

Table 1. Description of Content and Quality Indicators

Content Indicators
• Language is clear and contains no technical jargon
• Parental concerns are described
• Content includes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ social skills to improve involvement in school and family activities ○ expressive, receptive and non-verbal communication skills (as appropriate) ○ symbolic functional communication system ○ engagement in tasks or play which are developmentally appropriate, including an appropriate motivational system ○ fine and gross motor skills to be utilized when engaging in age appropriate activities ○ basic cognitive and academic thinking skills ○ replacement of problem behaviors with appropriate behaviors ○ organizational skills and other behaviors that underlie success in a general education classroom (independently completing a task, following instructions, asking for help, etc).
• Goals are individualized and adapted from the academic content standards
Quality Indicators
• The child's present level of performance is described for this goal
• The child's performance of this objective is described in a manner that links it to the general curriculum
• The child's performance of this objective is described in a manner that links it to developmental curriculum
• This goal/objective is able to be measured in behavioral terms
• The conditions under which the behavior is to occur is provided
• The criteria and timeline for goal attainment is described specifically for objective (other than for length of IEP)
• A method of goal measurement is described
• Specially designed instruction is individualized to the goal/objective

Results and Discussion

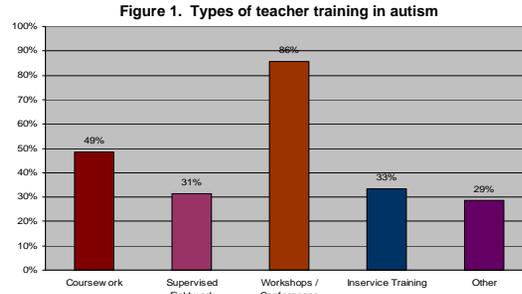


Table 2. Description of Goals, Objectives Extended School Year, and Ancillary Services

Goals/Objectives	Mean ± SD
Number of Goals	3.8 ± 1.1 (range = 1-6)
Number of Objectives	14.8 ± 9.9 (range = 4-111)
ESY	% Yes
Addressed	51.4
Recommended	8.6
Review of related services	Mean # Minutes / Week ± SD
Speech therapy	66.5 ± 43.6
Occupational therapy	29.3 ± 21.0
Physical therapy	0.8 ± 3.1

Figure 2. Analysis of IEPs based on Quality and Content Indicators.

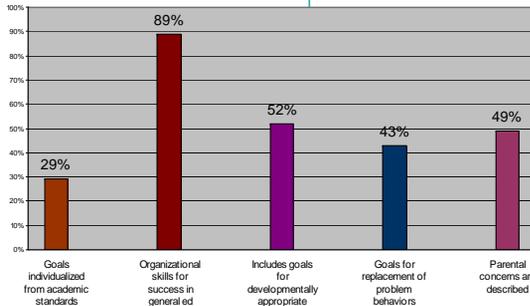
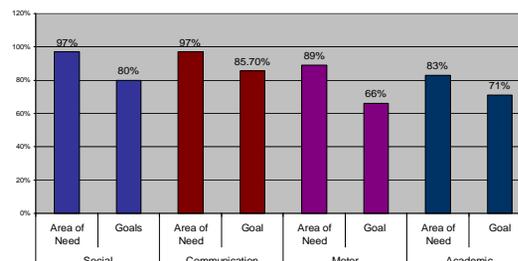


Figure 3. Percent of Domain by Area of Need and Goal Identified



Results and Discussion

Training

- Workshops and conferences were teachers most frequently reported method of training (see Figure 1).

IEP Descriptive Information

- Table 2 describes number of goals and objectives, selection extended school year services (ESYP), and use of ancillary services. ESY was recommended for only 9% of children.

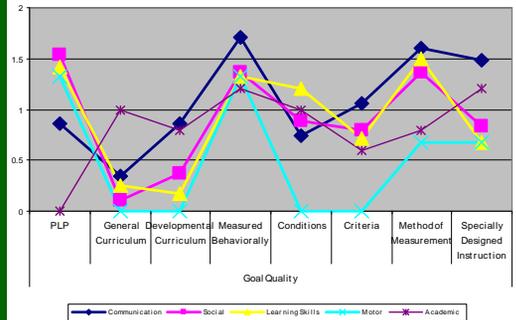
IEP Quality & Content Analysis

- Analysis of quality and content variables (see Figure 2) indicates that less than 1/3 of objectives are individualized to child and about half are developmentally appropriate.
- Parent concerns were only included in half of the IEPs.

Teacher Factors and IEP Quality

- Correlational analysis of Teaching Stress and IEP quality revealed a direct and significant relationship, $r = .40, p = .02$
- Correlational analysis of number of training opportunities in autism and adaptation of IEP goals from state academic standards also revealed a direct and significant correlation ($r = .38, p = .02$).
- T-test of quality of IEPs and school demographics (urban vs. rural) revealed a significant difference, $t(30) = 2.39, p = .02$. Teachers from urban areas had better quality IEPs.

Figure 4. Analysis of Quality of Objective by Type of Domain



Recommendations

Autism is no longer a low incidence disability. Evidence based practices indicate that students with autism require specialized interventions that include social and communication skill development. To meet best practice standards, much work needs to be done to improve the quality and content of IEPs. A main finding was a lack of adequate parameters of measurability of IEP objectives. Without measurable goals, the ability to determine child response to educational programs is difficult.

Recommendations for Improved IEPs

- Provide descriptions of parental concerns in the IEP
- Link descriptions of students present level of skill to general or developmental curriculum
- Provide behavioral descriptions of objectives
- Individualize objectives from state academic standards
- Evaluate for ESY and provide ESY to students with autism
- Provide more social and communication objectives