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.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1. Types of teacher training in autism

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals/Objectives</th>
<th>Means</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Goals</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Objectives</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressed</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommended</td>
<td>5.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of related services</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Minutes / Week ± SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech therapy</td>
<td>66.6±43.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational therapy</td>
<td>28.3±21.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical therapy</td>
<td>0.8±3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of Need</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Area of Need Communication</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Area of Need Motor</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Area of Need Academic</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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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.

• 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 of 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 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.

• Correlational analysis of teacher training and IEP quality revealed a direct and significant relationship, r = .40, p = .02.
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