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Curricular Philosophies Reflected in IEP Goals for Students with Complex Support Needs

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Abstract:	Individualized education program (IEP) goals are meant to be personalized to address the needs of students with disabilities, while also reflecting grade-aligned general education curriculum. In this study, we analyzed how IEP goals align with the different curricular philosophies for students with severe disabilities articulated by Browder and colleagues (2003). Using a sample of 88 IEPs for students with complex support needs in grades K-12, we found most goals (57%) reflect curricular philosophies of the 1970s-1990s, with only 26% of IEP goals representative of modern curricular philosophies. We also found secondary-aged students were less likely to have grade-aligned academic goals compared to elementary-aged students. We offer implications for ensuring individualization and goals reflecting skills needed for the 21st century.

Abstract

Individualized education program (IEP) goals are meant to be personalized to address the unique needs of students with disabilities, while also reflecting the student's grade-aligned general education curriculum. IEP goals describe what, how, and where students with disabilities are taught, and reflect the curriculum used to provide instruction. In this study, we analyzed how IEP goals align with the different curricular philosophies for students with severe disabilities articulated by Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, Algozzine, and Karvonen (2003). Using a sample of 88 IEPs for students with complex support needs (i.e., severe disabilities) in grades K-12, we found most goals (57%) reflect curricular philosophies of the 1970s-1990s (i.e., developmental, functional, and social inclusion) eras, with only 26% of IEP goals representative of modern curricular philosophies (i.e., grade-aligned academic content). We also found secondary-aged students were less likely to have grade-aligned academic goals compared to elementary-aged students. We offer implications for ensuring individualization and goals reflecting skills needed for the 21st century.

Keywords: Individualized Education Program, Goals, Curriculum, Severe Disabilities

Curricular Philosophies Reflected in IEP Goals for Students with Complex Support Needs

What and how students with disabilities should be taught has been discussed since the inception of special education (Dymond & Orelove, 2001). With advances in policy, research, and practice, there have been corresponding changes in the education of students with disabilities (Wehmeyer, 2014). This is particularly true for students with complex support needs. This population includes students with the following characteristics: (a) have support needs that span multiple life domains (Kennedy & Horn, 2004); (b) qualify to take their state's alternate assessment; and (c) have disability labels including intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities. Policy, initially guided by the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975, and its later reauthorizations as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990, 1997, 2004), has placed increasing emphasis on access to and progress in the general curriculum for all students with disabilities, including those with complex support needs.

Evolving Curricular Foci for Students with Complex Support Needs

Consistent with policy initiatives, research since the 1970s has evolved as well. As articulated by Browder and colleagues (2003), research has shaped curricular philosophies for students with complex support needs (see Table 1). These philosophies are described below.

Developmental

Browder et al. (2003) note the developmental approach to disability emerged following the passage of the EHA in 1975. During this early era of special education, identification of a child's mental age was used to determine skills to target for instruction. Because many children with complex support needs had not received a formal education, and often develop skills unevenly or at a slower pace, the mental age of children with complex support needs was frequently determined to be far below their chronological age. Consequently, curriculum

targeting skills required for very young children and toddlers, including early communication, motor, and self-care skills, became the primary skills emphasized for students with complex support needs, regardless of how age inappropriate or non-functional these skills were in meeting the needs and preferences of people with complex support needs.

Functional Life Skills

From 1975 through the late 1980s, the shortcomings of the developmental philosophy became apparent, guided in large part by the “criterion of ultimate performance” as articulated by Brown, Nietupski, and Hamre-Nietupski (1976), which advises educators to focus on teaching skills needed for current and future environments. Thus, the functional life skills philosophy emphasizes teaching skills needed to live and work in the community (Browder et al., 2003). Emphasis is placed on teaching skills related to major domains of life including vocational, home, community, and leisure.

Social Inclusion

From the mid 1980s to the 1990s, philosophy pertaining to educating students with complex support needs remained rooted in the functional curriculum, but a belief that students with complex support needs could benefit from increased social opportunities with their peers without disabilities emerged. Within the social inclusion philosophy, a social membership curriculum is emphasized, whereby students with complex support needs are taught to form friendships, develop social communication skills, and maintain appropriate behavior (Browder et al., 2003).

Self-Determination

In the 1990s, self-advocates with disabilities began pushing for more independence and the right to make choices and decisions about their own lives. From this emerged the self-

determination and person-centered planning philosophical approaches to curriculum for students with complex support needs (Browder et al., 2003). As a result, schools began to create more opportunities and honor preferences of students by focusing instruction on self-determination skills such as choice making and goal setting.

Functional Academics

Throughout the 1990s, research began to accumulate noting the ability of children with complex support needs to learn academic content. Congress thus strengthened the requirement students with disabilities make progress in the general education curriculum when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 1997. Special curriculum was developed to meet these needs, with a focus on teaching academic skills with a functional application component, such as community-based sight words, time, and money skills (Browder et al., 2003). These skills continued to be taught until mastered, usually beyond an age when they are taught in general education settings.

General Curriculum Access

By the 2000s, accountability for teaching students with complex support needs became a priority (IDEA, 2004). With this has come a greater focus on teaching grade-level academic content. Beliefs about the educational needs of students with complex support needs shifted from the need to learn functional academics to learning general curriculum content areas such as reading, math, science, and social studies. Individualized education program (IEP) goals were written to reflect grade-level content standards (e.g., Browder et al., 2006).

Philosophies Continue to Evolve

While evolutions of curricular philosophies correspond with different time spans, overlap in focus persists, as is evident in current debates related to the role of functional versus academic

instruction for students with complex support needs (Ballard & Dymond, 2017). Because some believe an emphasis on academic instruction competes with instructional time needed to prepare students for life after school, individualized functional skill instruction is prioritized (Ayres et al., 2011). In contrast, Courtade and colleagues (2012) dispute the importance of only focusing instruction on functional skills and point to learning academic content standards as important for students with complex support needs to develop the skills to live more independent and fulfilling lives. As such, a blended or balanced approach to curriculum is emerging, incorporating elements of various eras of curricular philosophies to ensure an equitable and appropriate education for students with complex support needs (Hunt et al., 2012).

While such a balanced approach appears to be a logical compromise, curricular philosophies continue to evolve and be shaped by research, policy, and practice. Recent research evidence pointing to the ability of students with complex support needs to learn grade-aligned academic content (e.g., Allor et al., 2018; Spooner et al., 2018) are compelling. Yet, evidence suggests educators set goals marked by low expectations for students with complex support needs, often focusing on communication and life skills rather than academic learning (Kleinert, et al., 2014). Moreover, research continues to highlight the need for increased expectations around progress in grade-aligned academic instruction and self-determination for students with complex support needs (Shogren et al., 2015; Spooner & Browder, 2015). Recent policy directives have similarly emerged from the *Endrew F. v Douglas County School District RE-1* (2017) Supreme Court decision. This decision set precedence for higher expectations for appropriately ambitious goals and curricular progress for students receiving special education services. Finally, the practice of educating more students with complex support needs in general education settings for at least part of the day than in years past, although incremental (Brock,

2018; Morningstar et al., 2017), represents a continued evolution in how and where students are taught.

Curriculum and Goals

Curriculum for students with disabilities who receive special education services is informed by both their grade level and the goals identified in their IEP. Specifically, students with disabilities, including those with complex support needs, are to make progress in grade-aligned general education curriculum with supports as necessary (IDEA, 2004). Additional IEP goals based on the student's unique needs are to be developed. As such, the IEP is considered one of the clearest indicators of what, where, and how students with disabilities are taught (LaSalle et al., 2013). IEP goals, then, are suitable proxy indicators of curriculum for students with disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2001).

Previous examinations of IEP goals have identified patterns in type and quality of goals based on student demographics, including age and the placement in which students receive special education services. For example, Kurth and Mastergeorge (2010) analyzed the IEP goals of students with autism and found students included in general education settings for math and language arts had higher-quality goals (i.e., applied skill development) while students taught in segregated settings had lower-quality goals (i.e., rote and procedural skills). Others have noted a trend in decreasing numbers of academic goals as students transition from elementary to secondary school (LaSalle et al., 2013).

Purpose

Given the evolving curricular philosophies for students with complex support needs, and the shifts in focus unfolding in the research, practice, and policy arenas, understanding the curricular philosophies reflected in IEP goals for this student population in practice is necessary.

The purpose of this study, then, is to analyze how IEP goals align with the different curricular philosophies outlined by Browder and colleagues (2003). Specifically, the following two research questions are addressed:

- (1) What curricular philosophies are reflected in IEP goals for students with complex support needs?
- (2) Are there differences in curricular philosophies based on student demographic characteristics, including age and placement in which students receive special education services?

Method

Participants

The IEP goals of 88 students with complex support needs representing all IDEA placements (see Procedure) were collected. To obtain a sample of IEPs from all four placement conditions, we obtained IEPs for students in six states from 41 teachers. Teachers de-identified the IEPs prior to providing them to the research team. These IEPs were developed for students with complex support needs during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. Each IEP met the following inclusion criteria: (a) written for a student in grades K-12, and (b) developed for a student with complex support needs, as confirmed by present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) and/or eligibility for the state alternate assessment. Specifically, students who had documented support needs within the PLAAFP across cognitive, academic, and functional performance domains were included.

Students ranged in age from 5 to 18 years ($M = 10.5$), and included 63 males and 25 females. All students had complex support needs, as defined earlier. Students' primary disability labels included autism ($n = 32$), intellectual disability ($n = 19$), orthopedic impairment ($n = 6$), other health impairment ($n = 6$), developmental delay ($n = 5$), multiple disabilities ($n = 7$), speech

language disorder ($n = 3$), emotional behavioral disorder ($n = 2$), hearing impairment ($n = 1$), and deaf-blindness ($n = 1$). In six instances, the student's primary disability could not be determined, as this information was obscured in the de-identification process. Despite the variability in disability labels, each student was confirmed to have complex support needs through examination of PLAAFP statements or eligibility for the state alternate assessment. For example, a student with a primary disability label of "emotional behavioral disorder" had an intellectual disability and used a speech generating device to communicate. The IEPs in the present study are part of a series of studies on IEP content for students with complex support needs (see Author et al., 2018; 2019). As such, student demographic information, including age, grade, gender, and disability label, already collected from the IEPs was used in the present analysis.

Instrument

To address the research questions of this exploratory study, a codebook was developed based on the definitions of curricular philosophies articulated by Browder and colleagues (2003). First, the definitions of curricular philosophies from Browder et al. (2003) were reviewed, and a codebook was created to operationally define each philosophical era. This codebook was ultimately used to assign each goal to a single curricular philosophy era. In instances where a goal included a keyword for more than one curricular philosophy (e.g., "sort," a keyword for developmental, and "money," a keyword for functional academics), the goal was assigned to a single curricular philosophy based on the curricular philosophy definition with which the overall goal more closely aligned. Three rounds of goal coding were completed to refine the codebook definitions and keywords. In the first round, the first two authors independently coded a random sample of four goals from eight IEPs ($n = 32$ goals). Each author wrote notes about their coding and met to discuss areas of agreement and disagreement in coding and notes. Interrater reliability

(IRR) was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the sum of agreements and disagreements, multiplied by 100. Round 1 IRR was 75%, with all disagreements centering on differences between functional academics and general curriculum. These discrepancies were addressed through discussion and refinement of the codebook definitions and keywords. Another 32 goals from eight randomly selected IEPs were then coded in Round 2, with additional discussion, consensus on disagreements, and refinement of the codebook definitions and keywords occurring. In this stage, the age of the student was added to the codebook to assist in addressing differences in functional academics versus general curriculum. Round 2 IRR was 78%; disagreements continued to center on functional academics, general curriculum and also developmental versus social inclusion goals. Thus, further refinements were made to the definitions and keywords. Finally, in Round 3, goals from an additional 11 IEPs ($n = 33$ goals) were randomly coded, with IRR at 92%. Disagreements in Round 3 varied substantially, without a clear pattern. The final instrument consists of six curricular philosophies: developmental, functional life skills, social inclusion, self-determination, functional academics, and general curriculum, as seen in Table 1.

Procedure

Upon development of the codebook and establishment of interrater reliability, the first two authors coded all 479 IEP goals from the 88 IEPs. All annual goals were identified in the IEPs; a university staff member typed all goals into a spreadsheet to facilitate data analysis. Both authors independently coded 164 goals each, and double-coded 151 goals to ensure IRR was maintained; final IRR was 89.4%. We examined and coded the annual goals section of each IEP; short-term objectives were not analyzed unless the IEP goal could not be interpreted without them (e.g., “the student will improve his reading skills so that he will meet the following

objectives...”). In these instances, the objectives were included in the analysis as part of the text of the goal ($n = 58$ goals).

Student age band and placement were determined through inspection of each IEP, and using the following definitions. Students ages 5 to 12 were considered to be elementary ($n = 61$ IEPs; $n = 342$ goals), whereas students ages 13 to 18 were considered secondary ($n = 27$ IEPs; $n = 137$ goals). We used IDEA Section 618 categories to determine student placement. Inclusive placements were defined as students spending 80% or more of the school day in general education settings ($n = 140$ goals, $n = 24$ student IEPs). Resource settings were defined as students spending between 41% and 79% of the school day in general education settings ($n = 118$ goals, $n = 20$ student IEPs). Self-contained settings were defined as students spending less than 40% of the school day in general education settings ($n = 221$ goals, $n = 44$ student IEPs). No students were taught in separate schools or home/hospital settings.

Data Analysis

All IEP goals were assigned to one of the six curricular eras defined in the codebook. The total number and percentage of IEP goals within each philosophy era were calculated. To determine if significant differences in the mean number of goals existed by student demographics (i.e., age band and placement), we completed t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Specifically, an independent samples t-test was completed to explore the impact of age (i.e., elementary and secondary) on goal philosophy era. Likewise, a one-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of placement in inclusive, resource, and self-contained settings on goal philosophy era.

Results

Goals by Philosophical Era

A total of 479 goals were included in the analysis, as seen in Figure 1. Of these, goals representing the general curriculum philosophy of curriculum were most common ($n = 124$ goals, 26%). For example, an IEP goal for a 7-year-old-old student was to “describe character, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.” Similarly, a 14-year-old student’s goal to use a “pre-determined topic with previously generated words...to generate novel sentences that are understood” reflects general curriculum access. These general curriculum goals represent skills used in the general education curriculum. Acquisition of such skills will allow students with complex support needs to continue to engage in, and learn from, the general education curriculum.

Goals defined by the social inclusion philosophy of curriculum were also frequently included in the sample IEPs ($n = 102$ goals, 21%). For example, a 16-year-old’s goal to use “voice output/AAC...to initiate and respond to greetings with familiar and unfamiliar peers/staff” illustrates the social inclusion philosophy era’s emphasis on social interactions and belonging. Other social goals targeted appropriate behavior, such as the following goal for a 12-year-old: “in 35 instructional weeks, [the student] will reduce engaging in unexpected behaviors (inappropriate vocalizations, property destruction, and elopement) to less than 25% of daily intervals.” Goals targeting problem behavior facilitate the ability of students to maintain their presence in classrooms with peers and receive instruction, while reducing social stigma and isolation that can result from engaging in problem behaviors.

Goals reflective of the developmental philosophy were third most common ($n = 99$ goals, 21%) in our sample. For example, an 8-year-old’s goal to “label targeted vocabulary and school

concepts in pictures, books, and environment and follow 1-3 step directions” reflects skills typically taught to young children and toddlers, and thus illustrates the developmental philosophy. Similarly, the goal of a 13-year-old student to “imitate an action on demand (e.g., putting on deodorant),” reflects simple skills (in this case, imitation) typically taught to very young children.

Goals assigned to the functional academic philosophy era ($n = 76$ goals, 16%) targeted skills with a functional application of academic content, when such content is not typically taught in the student’s grade. For example, a 16-year-old’s goal to “name and give values to units of money by...stat[ing] the names of coins correctly...point[ing] to the correct coin...[and matching] like bills” illustrates this philosophy. A functional academic philosophy is also apparent in use of special education curriculum. For example, an 8-year-old in our sample had an IEP goal to “read 100 pre-primer and primer Dolch sight words. She will be able to read 50 Edmark words.”

Goals from the functional life skills philosophy were coded in 72 IEP goals (15%). These goals typically represent preparation for vocations and adult living. For example, a 5-year-old’s IEP goal to “complete all the steps in the task/workboxes...when presented with a 4 step novel task/workbox and a visual strip” illustrates the functional life skill philosophical era. Often, these functional life skills goals incorporated a compliance component in addition to a vocational focus. For example, the goal for a 10-year-old, “when given multi-step visuals or directions to follow, [the student] will complete two vocational jobs” includes both requirements to follow directions and complete a task.

The least common philosophical goal area was self-determination, with only 6 goals (1%). An example of a self-determination goal in our sample was for an 11-year-old student,

who “will self-advocate when presented with problem-solving situations in which he cannot solve the problem independently.”

Differences in Goal Era by Student Demographics

Age

An independent-samples t-test was completed to compare the types of goals for students based on age band (elementary and secondary; see Table 2). There was a statistically significant difference in goals for functional academic goals for elementary ($M = .59, SD = .783$) and secondary students ($M = 1.48, SD = 1.124$); $t(86) = -3.780, p = .003$. This indicates elementary-age students had fewer goals from the functional academic philosophy era compared to secondary students. There was also a statistically significant difference in general curriculum access goals for elementary ($M = 1.69, SD = .780$) and secondary students ($M = .78, SD = 1.050$); $t(86) = 2.370, p = .002$. This finding reveals elementary-age students had more goals in the general curriculum access philosophy compared to secondary-age students. No other significant differences in types of goals by age band were detected.

Placement

A one-way analysis of variance was completed to compare the types of goals for students based on placement in inclusive, resource, and self-contained settings (see Table 3). There was a statistically significant difference by philosophy of goal for developmental goals: $F(2, 84) = 3.943, p = .029$. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated the mean score for students in the self-contained group ($M = 3.47, SD = 2.095$) was significantly different from the included group ($M = 1.50, SD = .707$). This indicates students taught in self-contained special education settings had more goals from the developmental philosophy compared to students taught in inclusion or resource settings. There was also a statistically significant difference in

type of goal for functional academics: $F(2, 84) = 3.291, p = .025$. Specifically, post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test found the mean score for students in the self-contained group ($M = 1.13, SD = 1.126$) was significantly different from the included ($M = .52, SD = .823$) and resource groups ($M = .68, SD = .839$). This finding indicates students with complex support needs taught in inclusive settings had fewer goals from the functional academic philosophy compared to students taught in self-contained classrooms. Finally, there was a statistically significant difference in general curriculum access goals by placement: $F(2, 84) = 7.739, p < .001$. Post-hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicated the mean score for students in the included group ($M = 2.48, SD = 2.201$) was significantly different from the self-contained group ($M = .65, SD = 1.051$). This indicates students taught in self-contained settings had fewer goals from the general curriculum access philosophy compared to students with complex support needs taught in inclusive settings. No other significant differences in type of goals were found based on student placement.

Discussion

Findings of the present analysis reveal students with complex support needs in our sample had IEP goals reflecting a variety of curricular philosophies. Of the goals in our sample, 57% reflected developmental, functional life skills, and social inclusion philosophies. As Browder et al. (2003) point out, these curricular philosophies were prevalent from the 1970s-1990s. In addition, while 42% of goals reflected an academic focus, only 26% aligned with grade-level content. Together, then, 74% of IEP goals in our analysis were not representative of grade-aligned content. Therefore, our findings suggest that a majority of IEP goals for students with complex support needs reflect curricular philosophies representative of early generation research and practice in special education.

Our findings also demonstrate differences in curricular philosophies of goals varied by student age. Specifically, secondary students had more functional academic goals, whereas elementary students had more general curriculum goals. The difference in curricular philosophy by student age might be explained by assumptions about the needs of students as they progress through school. Functional skills include age-appropriate skills that are both determined by and taught within the student's current and future natural environments (Brown et al., 1979). Researchers continue to focus on functional skills as a way to ensure students can live and work as adults within their communities (Ayres et al., 2011). However, functional skills, as they are currently conceptualized by IEP teams in the present study (e.g., time, money), do not reflect the current and future skills needed of individuals living in the 21st century. For example, credit cards and smart phone apps that are used to send and receive money, along with apps for scheduling appointments and reminders to engage in activities, are rapidly replacing skills needed for writing checks, identifying coins, and telling time (e.g., Shen & Yazdanifard, 2015). This suggests that a re-thinking of functional skills is needed in order to prepare students for current and future environments, and to ensure curriculum content reflects and prepares students for integrated paid employment and community living (Wehman et al., 2018). Thus, functional goals in the current decade must be written to focus on technology, jobs, and communities of the present and the future, rather than the past (Cihak et al., 2015). Modern functional goals would further benefit from self-determination skills considerations; specifically, students could be taught to use self-determination skills to direct and manage their own supports, use and troubleshoot assistive technology, and otherwise be causal agents in their own lives (Shogren et al., 2015).

Curricular philosophy also varied by placement in significant ways, with students taught in self-contained settings having more developmental goals compared to students taught in inclusive settings, and more functional academic goals than students taught in resource and inclusive settings. Students taught in inclusive settings had more general curricular access goals than students taught in self-contained settings. Together, these findings suggest students in the most restrictive settings (i.e., self-contained) have the least access to the general education curriculum and are most likely to be taught skills that are reflective of earlier eras, which are developmental or functional in nature. These findings suggest a relationship between placement and IEP goal content, and raise concerns about the individualization of IEP goals for students with complex support needs. These findings further prompt questions about how perceived student needs may drive placement decisions based on the evidence that IEP teams may develop IEP goals based on student placement, rather than individual student needs.

The findings of the present study also build on findings related to outcomes of inclusive education. Previous research has found general education classrooms provide more instructional time for academic tasks, greater access to peers without disabilities, and more opportunities to embed skills into meaningful activities than special education classrooms (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012; Ruppert et al., 2018). Others have found correlations between student placement in inclusive settings and positive student outcomes (e.g., Dessemontet et al., 2012; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012). In the current study, IEP goals for students in inclusive settings were more reflective of a contemporary focus on access and progress in the general education curriculum. This finding offers an explanation as to one possible reason students with complex support needs taught in inclusive settings experience improved outcomes; however, further research is needed to clarify this relationship.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the present study. First, the small sample size prohibits broad generalizations of our findings. However, that IEPs represent several states offers some indication the findings are reflective of typical IEP goal content. Second, we do not know how decisions were made or what factors were considered when developing each of these goals. Such information would add contextual richness to the findings, and should be considered in future studies. These could include factors such as teacher background, family input, and other school-based resources. Future research analyzing IEPs should account for these considerations. Third, it is possible the IEP goals do not reflect the entirety of the curricular focus for students. As we have noted, IEP goals are considered proxy indicators of curriculum for students with complex support needs (Wehmeyer et al., 2001); however, observations of curriculum use in future research projects are warranted. Finally, it is possible that inspection of the IEP as a whole would have impacted our assessment of the IEP goals. For example, it is possible a student did not have an academic goal because this was not a priority of the family or school; this decision may have been captured in meeting notes but not in the IEP goals. Thus, more research is needed to triangulate data from across the IEP contents.

Implications

The findings of the present study offer initial insights into the curricular philosophy reflected in IEP goals for students with complex support needs. Further research is needed, however, to fully explore the relationships between student placement, grade, and other demographic factors and IEP goal era. Specifically, more research is needed to better understand how IEP teams write goals and how placement decisions are made for students with complex support needs. The sample in this study points to IEP goals being developed based on the setting

where students are educated, which could indicate problematic implementation of the IEP process. Additional research is needed to expand the current study with a larger sample size in order to better understand how teams develop goals and determine placement for students with complex support needs more broadly. The results from this study indicate students placed in general education settings have more grade-level aligned academic goals. Future studies are needed to describe the impact educational placement has on the long-term outcomes of students with complex support needs.

Based on the sample in this study, a continued call for legislation ensuring access to grade-level content for students with complex support needs is needed. Elementary students in this study had more general access goals which is not surprising, given the challenges related to pace and rigor of secondary curriculum (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). This does, however, point to the need to write goals and provide supports for access and progress across grade levels. Finally, we recognize individualization is important. The purpose of this study is not to advocate for all students with complex support needs to receive special education services exclusively to support access to the academic general education content. Rather, we suggest the educational focus should shift from outdated educational priorities of previous decades to individualization of grade-level aligned academics and 21st century skills for students with complex support needs.

Conclusion

Legislation, research, and practice continuously evolve, resulting in significant changes in how and what students are taught today compared to 30 or 50 years ago. However, the IEP goals analyzed in this sample found a focus on educational priorities from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s for students with complex support needs. Given these evolving practices and priorities, it is

essential IEP goals reflect rigorous, contemporary, and future-oriented skills for students with complex support needs to enable them to be successful, and self-fulfilled citizens.

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Table 1
Definitions and Key Words for Curricular Focus of IEP Goals

Curricular Philosophy and Years	Definition	Keywords
Developmental (1975)	The educational needs of students with complex support needs are met by focusing on early communication, motor, or self-care skills. Skills addressed are typically mastered by toddlers.	Basic communication (e.g., pointing to pictures, requesting); Orient to sound; Basic mobility; Eye contact; Grasp and release; Sort; Identify feelings; Label pictures
Functional Life Skills (1975 to late 1980s)	The educational needs of students with complex support needs are met by teaching skills needed to live and work in the community, emphasizing the major domains of life (vocational, home, community, leisure).	Safety; Follow directions; Cross the street; Make a purchase; Cook; Get dressed; Work for a specific amount of time; Task completion
Social Inclusion (Mid 1980s to 1990s)	The educational needs of students with complex support needs are met by addressing opportunities to form friendships, developing social communication skills, and maintaining appropriate behavior.	Pragmatic communication skills, including: social greeting, asking for information, using augmentative/assistive communication; Participating in activity with peer; Reducing problem behaviors
Self-Determination (1990s to present)	The educational needs of students with complex support needs are met by creating opportunities and honoring preferences, focusing instruction on skills like choice making and goal setting.	Choice; Problem solving; Decision-making; Self-advocacy; Identify strategies to help learn a new task; Describe personal strengths; Use a problem-solving process
Functional Academics (1990s to present)	The educational needs of students with complex support needs are met by teaching academics with a functional application component, when these are taught in general education settings. Academic skills are taught using special education curricula or materials.	Academic skills required to complete life or adult skills, including: money, calendar, time skills, coin identification, and dollar-up strategies; Special education curriculum, including: EdMark, SRA, Unique Learning Systems, and News2You
General Curriculum (2000s to present)	The educational needs of students with complex support needs are met by learning general curriculum content areas such as reading, math, science, and social studies that reflect grade-level content standards.	Reading comprehension; Sight word decoding; Math computation; Math problem solving; Writing sentences and paragraphs

Table 2
Mean Number of Goals by Philosophical Era and Age Band Across All IEPs

	Elementary		Secondary		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Developmental	2.81	2.024	2.00	1.095	.942	86	.352
Functional Life Skills	1.68	.900	1.67	.840	.049	86	.961
Social	1.16	.934	1.15	1.322	.064	86	.949
Self-Determination	.05	.218	.11	.320	-1.058	86	.293
Functional Academic	.59	.783	1.48	1.124	-3.780	86	.003*
General Curriculum	1.69	.780	.78	1.050	2.370	86	.002*

Note. * $p < .005$

Table 3
Mean Number of Goals by Era and Placement

	Inclusion		Resource		Self-Contained		<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
Developmental	1.50	.707	2.50	1.900	3.47	2.095	3.943	2	.029*
Functional Life Skills	1.33	.707	1.55	.820	1.87	.920	1.436	2	.250
Social	1.40	1.041	1.14	1.082	1.03	1.074	.647	2	.587
Self-Determination	.12	.322	.00	.000	.08	.267	.910	2	.440
Functional Academic	.52	.823	.68	.839	1.13	1.126	3.291	2	.025*
General Curriculum	2.48	2.201	1.64	1.364	.65	1.051	7.739	2	<.001**

Note. * $p < .05$ ** $p < .001$

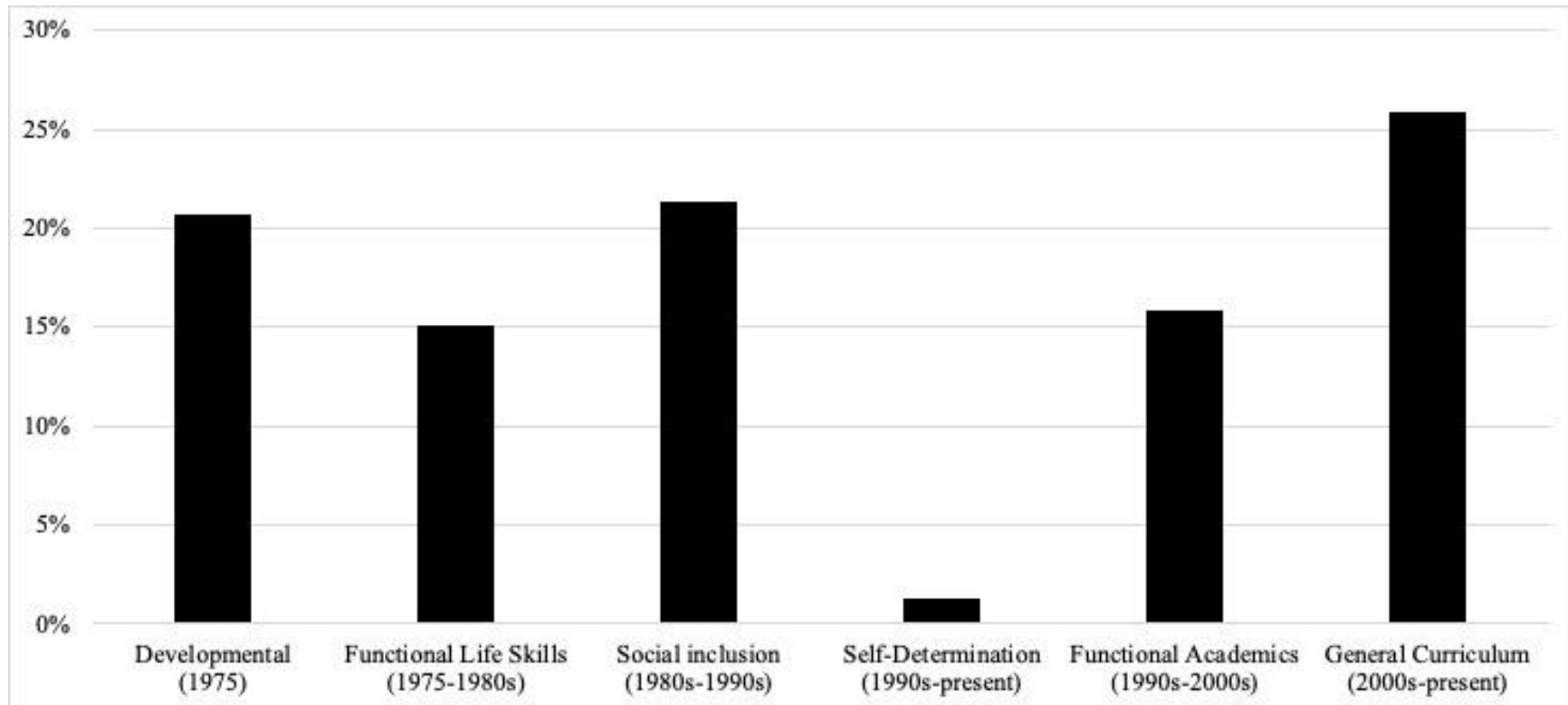


Figure 1. Percentage of goals by curricular philosophy era of 479 IEP goals written in 2016-2018.