
Going Off Script: Structure and Agency in Individualized Education Program Meetings

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In this comparative case study, we draw from neoinstitutional and structuration theory to examine the individualized education program (IEP) meetings for five high school students identified with specific learning disabilities. Specifically, we examine how participants interacted during the IEP meetings and how learning, instruction, and postsecondary transition were discussed. Findings suggest that the IEP document served as the dominant script, or structure, for the IEP meetings. This dominant script established roles for participation and influenced participants' agency within the meetings. We also highlight instances of disruption when participants exerted agency and went off script, breaking from the institutionalized structure of the meetings.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004, PL 94-142) provides the legal foundation and structural framework to provide students with disabilities a free, appropriate public education that attends to their unique learning needs (Yell and Crockett 2011). The individualized education program (IEP) remains the cornerstone of IDEA, serving as a legal contract between school districts and parents of a student with a disability (Bateman 2011). IEPs outline the types of educational services and supports that districts must provide to students at no cost to parents. IEPs are drafted at an annual IEP meeting where the student, parent(s), teacher(s), school administrator(s), and other professionals discuss, evaluate, and approve the document. IDEA makes it clear that students and parents are equal members of the IEP team. Therefore, the field envisions the IEP meeting as a collaborative decision-making process between students, parents, and school professionals.

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Although dated, a substantial body of observational research revealed the lack of meaningful involvement of parents, students, and general educators during IEP meetings (Goldstein et al. 1980; Lynch and Stein 1987; Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, et al. 2006; Mehan 1983; Ruppap and Gaffney 2011; Turnbull and Turnbull 1990; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, et al. 1982). For instance, studies have consistently found that special educators speak more than other participants during IEP meetings (Goldstein et al. 1980; Lovitt and Cushing 1999; Lynch and Stein 1987; Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, et al. 2006; Salembier and Furney 1997). Furthermore, when parents speak, they often enact a passive role (Klingner and Harry 2006; Turnbull and Turnbull 1990; Vacc et al. 1985). Likewise, studies indicate that school participants typically present data to parents and students with little discussion, that parents understand very little of the technical jargon used, and that certain terminology is used with the goal of having parents sign the IEP with little discussion (Harry et al. 1995; Ruppap and Gaffney 2011; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, et al. 1982).

As such, policy reforms have sought to strengthen the role that students and parents play in IEP meetings (Madaus et al. 2011). For instance, amendments to IDEA in 1997 and 2004 encourage secondary students to take an active role in transition planning by identifying their interests and preferences along with a course of study to achieve their transition goals. These amendments are supported by research indicating that greater involvement of students and parents during IEP meetings is associated with better student outcomes, including school engagement, academic performance, social adjustment, and independence (Newman 2005; Poponi 2009).

To improve student and parent involvement during IEP meetings, a wave of more recent studies have taken a design approach aiming to increase collaboration among team members (Menlove et al. 2001; Whitbread et al. 2007)

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and to promote student involvement (Horn et al. 2000; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al. 2006; Mason et al. 2002). For example, the Self-Directed IEP is an intervention designed to teach students IEP leadership skills through the use of role-playing, video modeling, and student work (Martin et al. 1996). Several studies have found that the Self-Directed IEP is effective at teaching students to actively participate in their IEP meetings (Allen et al. 2001; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen, et al. 2006; Snyder 2000; Sweeney 1997). These studies and others provide evidence that interventions can increase team member participation during IEP meetings. With this being said, these design studies have not explicitly contributed to theory that seeks to understand the mechanisms that limit and promote the participation of different team members during IEP meetings. Without theoretical frameworks to understand the mechanisms that prevent robust IEP team processes, it is hard to know how and why interventions to improve participation work or fail. Thus, further research that engages with and builds theory is necessary to gain better understanding of how and why parents and students typically continue to have limited participation in IEP meetings.

In this study, we attend to this gap in the literature by drawing from neo-institutional and structuration theory to understand how policy-determined structures encourage different participants to take more or less active roles in the IEP team process. To do this, we examined IEP meetings for five high school students identified with specific learning disabilities who received instruction in general education classrooms, analyzing how IEP team members interacted during the IEP meetings.

Conceptual Framework

Our work is grounded in the neoinstitutional theory tradition and aims to examine how institutionalized structures dictated by special education policy shape practice in schools. Additionally, we use structuration theory to understand how and when agency is exercised within the confines of these institutional structures. Institutional theory seeks to explain constancy and change in structures, norms, and practice in organizations by drawing attention to the ways in which they are linked to an organization's broader social and cultural environment (Coburn 2004; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott 1995). It has traditionally been used in education to explain why schools in diverse contexts with little interaction look so much alike (Burch 2007; DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Metz 1989) and why policies and other reform efforts have such difficulty influencing the technical core of schooling, teaching, and learning (Meyer and Rowan 1978; Weick 1995).

Structuration theory extends institutional theory by explicitly linking macro-level institutional pressures with microlevel action (Powell and Colyvas 2008). Structuration theory posits that the actions of actors within organizations are linked to larger societal structures that are defined by the cognitive, normative, and regulative dimensions of organizational fields (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Institutions are then socially constructed templates for action, generated and maintained through ongoing interactions (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Institutions exhibit an inherent duality: they arrive from and constrain social action (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Giddens 1981). As Giddens (1981) posited, the institutional realm represents a framework of rules and typifications that are derived from a cumulative history of action and interpretation. Barley and Tolbert (1997) note that it is useful to think of institutions being enacted through “scripts,” which are conceptualized as “behavioral regularities” or “observable recurrent activities and patterns of interaction characteristic of particular settings” (98). The interplay between structure and action, called the process of structuring, describes how institutions shape action, which in turn reaffirms or modifies institutional structure (Barley 1986).

Special education is an apt case for exploring the relationship between structure and agency for numerous reasons. Special education policy has now been in place and relatively stable for more than 30 years. The core features of the policy specify that students are educated in accordance with an IEP, which is reviewed annually through a standardized procedure (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). Special education policies are composed of mandates that provide considerable guidance for the enactment of special education practice. Policies specify roles for key actors, including special education teachers, parents, general education teachers, and other educational specialists (e.g., psychologists). As such, special education policies are akin to the definition of an institution posited by Barley and Tolbert (1997, 96): “shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships.” Given that special education practice has a long history defined by policy, theory suggests it is likely to have gained widespread acceptance and is therefore more apt to influence practice (Barley and Tolbert 1997). The institution of special education has been reinforced by legislation that has consequences for schools, including the risk of costly lawsuits for noncompliance (e.g., *Gaskin v. Pennsylvania Department of Education*), which then influences the actions of educators.

Special education policy and practice engender complex power dynamics. Original special education legislation aimed to empower parents to act on behalf of their children to ensure they received a “free appropriate public education” and to redress the powerlessness of families whose children had historically been excluded from the education system (Herr 1999; Kotler 1994; Phillips 2008). Parents have a powerful tool at their disposal—lawsuits—which

render educators and school districts vulnerable (Phillips 2008; Thomason 2007). Teachers are caught in the middle between school districts and parents. Districts count on teachers to act as gatekeepers of costly specialized services, and parents rely on them to advocate for the educational needs of their children. As Harry et al. (1995) explained, “As professionals identify with the culture of the school bureaucracy, most become entrenched in a ‘we-they’ posture by which parents are seen as potential adversaries rather than allies. In special education, the due process specifications make this even more likely” (374).

Given these power dynamics, theory drives us to hypothesize that teachers may seek to assert control over the IEP team meeting in order to mitigate the vulnerability inherent in the IEP process. Whereas parents have the authority of the law, teachers and educational specialists have the authority of expertise, which they use in an effort to assert control (McDermott 1993; Mehan 1983). Ultimately, these power dynamics can make the IEP team process contentious and, in theory, can provide opportunities for agency to be asserted by multiple actors. Empirical work, however, suggests that IEP meetings tend to follow a standard format and to provide limited opportunities for authentic discourse (Harry et al. 1995; Rupp and Gaffney 2011; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, et al. 1982). Given this complex dynamic between structure and agency in the special education process, we sought to examine the forces that structure IEP team processes and the ways in which participants exert agency in light of that structure.

Method

To investigate the extent to which IEP meetings embodied institutionalized structures that shaped discussion and team members’ agency within the meetings, we examined data from a qualitative comparative case study that explored how two secondary schools organized for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. The data-collection approach for the broader study was ethnographic in nature, as we attempted to understand how schools enacted inclusion from the perspective of the participants.

Our investigation of structure and agency in IEP meetings was an emergent line of analysis. As we observed IEP meetings, we noticed that the meetings looked quite similar. In each meeting, special educators primarily read from a written IEP document to parents, and team discussion was minimal. Given this observed pattern, we formed more structured research questions to guide the investigation and to further explore the mechanisms that promoted this pattern of interaction across student meetings and school and district contexts. Therefore, this investigation explored the following research questions:

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1. How do participants engage during IEP meetings?
2. How are IEPs discussed and used during IEP meetings?
3. To what extent and how do participants disrupt the dominant discourse patterns in the IEP meetings?
4. What are the outcomes of disrupting the dominant discourse patterns at the IEP meetings?

Sampling Criteria

Two high schools located in two different districts were purposefully selected to meet the objectives of the broader study: exploring how secondary schools organize for inclusion. The state education agency and other local informants recommended these two schools as ones with effective full inclusion programs and practices in proximity to our institution. Additionally, the two high schools afforded us the opportunity to observe two different modes of organizing for inclusion, with Willow HS emphasizing a consultation model and Elm HS investing more heavily in co-taught instruction.¹ For the purposes of this investigation, the comparative case study design allowed us to examine if the structure of the IEP meetings; discussion of instruction, learning, and postsecondary transition; and the agency of team members remained consistent across schools with differing models and practices for implementing full inclusion.

We selected five focal students (three in Willow HS and two in Elm HS) to bound data collection about the IEP process (i.e., IEP meeting, IEP implementation, and monitoring of the IEP). Identifying focal students allowed us to closely examine whether the structure of the IEP meetings; discussion of instruction, learning, and postsecondary transition; and agency of different team members differed between students' IEP meetings within and across schools. The sampling criteria for each student were: (1) in tenth or eleventh grade, (2) identified with a specific learning disability, and (3) requiring modifications and accommodations in her or his classroom. Given these criteria, school staff recommended students that reflected the typical supports they provided to fully included students with learning disabilities. The demographics for the five focal students selected are provided in table 1.

Data Collection

Our primary data sources for this study were: (1) video recordings and transcripts of the focal students' IEP meetings, (2) field notes of the IEP meetings, and (3) IEPs and other related documents for the focal students. We video recorded and observed each of the IEP meetings ($N = 5$), ranging from 45 to

TABLE 1

Focal Students

Focal Student	School	Sex	Grade Level	Impacted by Disability	Ethnicity
Andrew	Willow	Male	11	Reading and math	Caucasian
Breann	Willow	Female	10	Math	Hispanic
Cara	Willow	Female	9/10	Reading, math, and behavior	African American
Danielle	Elm	Female	10	Reading and math	Caucasian
Erik	Elm	Male	10	Reading, math, and social skills	Caucasian

90 minutes. The video recordings of the IEP meetings were later transcribed. Field notes were taken during the IEP meetings on the setting of the room, artifacts used, and nonverbal aspects of communication. Copies of the documents used at the meetings were also collected.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by our research questions. First, we examined participants' engagement during the meetings by creating tables to compare the number of words spoken and turns taken by each of the team members within each meeting. We then developed an emergent coding scheme and coded each participant turn as one of the following discourse moves: acknowledging, facilitating, informing, explaining, agreeing/confirming, disagreeing/countering, questioning, and miscellaneous. For instance, the acknowledging code was defined as a casual agreement, something done or said without being prompted, or an interjection to confirm understanding or following of information (e.g., "Yeah, okay, sure"). We created matrices and drafted memos to explore the patterns of participant engagement in the meetings by role (e.g., what discourse moves parents tended to use in the meetings).

Second, we examined how participants discussed and used the students' IEPs during the IEP meetings. We verified our initial impression that meetings largely followed the structure of the IEP document by comparing meeting transcripts to IEPs, noting consistencies and differences. We also examined how documents seemed to influence ways that participants interacted during the meeting. For example, we took note of who read and summarized the documents and who cued team members' attention to the documents.

Third, we examined moments of disruption. By *disruption* we mean instances when participants interrupted the dominant pattern of interaction—special

educators reading from the IEP—and one or more participants offered new information, disagreed with or countered information read from the IEP, or raised a question. For example, when a team member was interacting in an uncommon role (e.g., a student shifting from acknowledging to questioning) or a change in discourse patterns occurred (e.g., evidence of authentic dialogue between team members). Based upon this analysis, we created summary tables (and within- and between-case matrices) so that we could examine and categorize the types of disruptions that occurred. These tables listed each disruption as a row and then identified characteristics of the disruption including who initiated it, what was said, and what the outcome of disruption was. By first paraphrasing a brief description of the outcomes of each disruption, a set of categories emerged that we used to code the outcomes: ignoring or dismissal, agreement from team members but no change to IEP or educational programming for student, and change to the IEP or plans for the student.

Finally, we looked for patterns in the outcomes of disruptions. We created a set of emergent codes to describe how the other team members responded to the disruption (i.e., clarification, agreement, action, new understanding, lack of action, lack of consensus, and ignoring/avoiding). For instance, an ignoring/avoiding code was assigned when the disruption was actively shut down. We coded the types of outcomes and created tables to explore patterns within and between meetings. Then, we examined if the outcomes of the disruption resulted in changes to the students' IEPs and the sections of the IEPs to which changes were made.

Findings

The annual IEP meeting is a mandated procedure for students designated as eligible for special education services. The educators, parents, and students in our study gathered as a team for this annual face-to-face meeting to review student progress, to decide on the level and type of specialized services necessary for continued or improved progress, to plan for postsecondary transition, and to document the outcome of the meeting in an IEP format intended to guide a student's education in the coming year. Yet, what we observed in five meetings in two different schools and districts bore little resemblance to a dynamic team process. We found that special educators tightly facilitated the meetings and spent the majority of meeting time reading from a written IEP document to other assembled team members. The structure and form of the policy-mandated documents served as a script: it guided both meeting content and participation. As the lead actors in delivering the script, special educators dominated the meetings, and other educators, parents, and students played a less active role. However, in moments when other team members disrupted the dominant

script to raise questions, provide another perspective, or discuss a problem, there emerged more robust individual agency and team processes.

Participant Engagement during the IEP Meetings

Our analysis indicated that, in each case, special educators dominated the words spoken during the meetings and assumed the lead role in production of the IEPs. In contrast, students and parents spoke significantly less than the special educators during the meetings and assumed mainly passive roles within the teams.

Special educators dominate words spoken.—Across the meetings, a similar proportion of words were spoken by team members occupying the same role (e.g., special education teacher; see table 2). The special educators, and when present, the school psychologist, spoke the majority of words uttered in the meetings, whereas students and parents spoke very little. Furthermore, the general educators, and when present, the special education director and transition coordinator, also did not speak much. Additionally, when present at the meetings, the guidance counselor, vice principal, and principal rarely spoke.

Participants' roles.—During all of the meetings, the team members played distinct roles. These roles illuminate relative levels of influence that team members had during the meetings. Specifically, the special educators and school psychologist played lead roles; general educators, transition coordinators, and special education directors played supportive roles; students and parents played passive roles; and guidance counselors, vice principals, and principals played peripheral roles.

The special educators, and when present, school psychologist, played a lead role in the meetings as revealed by the following actions that they commonly displayed during the meetings: welcoming and introducing team members, providing the participants with documents and materials, reading from the IDEA-mandated documents, and managing the flow of the conversation. For example, in all of the meetings, the special educators spoke a significant percentage of the words spoken during the meeting by reading from the IDEA-mandated documents they themselves had drafted prior to the meeting to the other team members (table 3). The special educators and school psychologist commonly signaled this reading of the IDEA-mandated documents by providing the other team members with the page numbers so they could follow along. This is highlighted in the following excerpt from Danielle's IEP meeting:

Special Educator: Okay. If you can turn to page 1, it just basically says, “[reading from IEP] Danielle presently is a 16-year-old tenth-grade student at Elm High School. Transition will be included in Danielle's IEP. Danielle currently resides with her parents in the Elm area. Danielle has an older brother who resides at home and an older sister.”

TABLE 2

Percentage of Words Spoken versus Percentage of Times Speaking at IEP Meeting

	Special Educator	General Educator(s)	Parent(s)	Student	Principal	Vice Principal	Guidance Counselor	School Psychologist	SpEd Director	Transition Coordinator
Andrew	43, 30	5, 2	13, 19	16, 24	...	...	2, 2	...	16, 17	5, 3
Breann	74, 48	21, 20	2, 15	3, 17	...	...	...	...	...	...
Cara	45, 37	1, 1	5, 28	1, 9	...	...	...	44, 19	4, 6	...
Danielle	70, 40	5, 6	16, 32	5, 16	3, 5	...	1, 1	...	...	...
Erik	73, 43	2, 2	23, 40	0*, 7	...	0*, 3	2, 5	...	...	...

* Indicates less than 1%.

TABLE 3

Reading versus Dialogue

	Andrew	Breann	Cara	Danielle	Erik
Reading (%)	29	37	40	34	54
Dialogue (%)	71	63	60	66	46

Similar to this excerpt, the special educators' signaling and then reading from the IEPs was common practice across the five meetings.

Comparable to the special educators' reading of the IEPs, the school psychologist during Cara's meeting read from a reevaluation report, which was very similar to the IEP. At the request of the parent, Cara had been reevaluated for special education services, which resulted in a change to her designated disability category from mental retardation (as identified in her IEP but now commonly referred to as an intellectual disability) to specific learning disability. Despite this being a change that should substantively influence Cara's educational program, the meeting primarily consisted of the psychologist reading and summarizing her reevaluation report. Across all of the meetings, only the special educators and school psychologist read aloud from and summarized the information in the IDEA-mandated documents.

The special educators also orchestrated the other team members' participation in the meetings, or rather cued participants when they should talk and what they should talk about. For instance, in the following example from Cara's meeting, the special educator cued the general educator to speak as follows:

Special Educator: I'm gonna let [math teacher] talk because she has to get going—she's been so patient sitting here. [Math teacher], would you like to touch on just some math and how she is doing in math?

General Educator: Well, this year I have Cara in Algebra I, and she's had Cs all year.

Similar to this excerpt, across the meetings, the special educators commonly cued the other participants for when and what to discuss. None of the other participants displayed this behavior during the meetings.

The general educators, and when present, transition coordinator and special education director, mainly played supportive roles in the meetings as revealed by the following actions: They listened to the information being presented and provided additional information to substantiate what the special educators had stated. Across the meetings, general educators typically explained and provided additional information to support what the special educator reported in the

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students' IEPs (e.g., grades, assessment scores). For example, in the following excerpt from Erik's meeting, the special educator described that the student's reading scores had improved but that he was still struggling in math. She went on to state that the educators modified his math assignments. The special educator then cued the math general educator (Marta) to discuss how they modified Erik's assignments.

Special Educator: The math skills are a concern. And Erik realizes that, right, Erik? Yeah because he gets frustrated when he doesn't understand it because he's so, so conscientious. He wants to do all the assignments; he wants to do well, so we modify in Marta's class tremendously, but I'll let Marta talk now.

General Educator: Erik uses a calculator, which makes a big difference. He does know how to use that. To modify tests, we do two different things. He gets the original test, and from that, I let him try everything. And then I also give him a second page, and the second page is an adaptive.

Other than the times when the special educators cued general educators to report information, the general educators tended to be silent (we only identified 11 exceptions to this trend). This was similar to how the transition coordinator (by providing information and answering questions regarding transition services) and special education director (by providing information and answering questions regarding the special education services offered at the district) interacted during the meetings.

Meanwhile, the students and parents played passive roles in the meetings, as revealed by their acknowledging, agreeing with, and listening to the information being presented. Common parent contributions included "yes," "I agree," and "okay." These short responses of acknowledgement and agreement are highlighted when comparing the number of times parents spoke to the number of words they spoke (table 2). For instance, at Danielle's meeting, the student spoke in 16% of the turns but only 5% of the words spoken. In contrast, the special educator spoke in 40% of the turns but 70% of the words spoken.

When present at the meetings, the guidance counselor, vice principal, and principal played peripheral roles by silently listening to the information being presented. There was no evidence that guidance counselors or administrators had aided in the preparation of the IEP outside of the meeting. As such, these team members who had power within the broader context of schooling defaulted to the special educators' authority over the IEP meeting and document. Although administrators rarely spoke, their silent presence signified the importance of the IEP meetings.

Discussion and Use of the IEP

Our analysis revealed that the IDEA-mandated documents, particularly the IEP, served as the dominant script that structured the IEP meetings. The IEP script generated and sustained discourse patterns and team members' participatory roles.

IDEA-mandated documents structure meetings.—During each of the meetings, the words spoken closely aligned with the wording in the IDEA-mandated documents. For instance, a significant percentage of words spoken were read or summarized from the IDEA-mandated documents (table 3). This reading and summarizing of the IDEA-mandated documents was characterized by the special educators, and occasionally by the school psychologist, speaking in stretches without breaks or dialogue with other team members. For instance, in an excerpt from Erik's IEP meeting, the special educator read from and summarized the present levels of performance section, uttering 430 words that were contained in or paraphrased from the IEP document without any breaks or interjections from other team members.

To illustrate what it sounded like when documents were read at the meetings, we compared a segment from Andrew's meeting with the IEP document. All text below was identical to the IEP document text with the exception of the passages that are italicized.

Special Educator: Basically, I said, [reading from IEP] Andrew is a 16-year-old junior in the Willow HS High School in the [XX School District]. He receives learning support services while fully included in a general education curriculum in a general education setting. Andrew has been receiving special education services since the fifth grade. There are no known reports of any medical conditions that may be impacting his educational performance. His overall medical history reports and any medical conditions that may be impacting his educational program. Wait. I'm sorry. His overall medical history appears to be unremarkable. At this time, there are no concerns with his vision or his hearing. There are no indications of any social or cultural background information that may be impeding Andrew's ability to learn within the educational setting.

Similar to this example, this practice of reading and summarizing from the IEP occurred in all five meetings.

The agenda of the meetings also followed the structure of the IDEA-mandated documents. The same topics were presented in an identical order, which aligned with the headings and sequence of the IEP. For instance, each meeting's discourse covered the following topics in a similar sequence: procedural safeguards, special considerations, student's present level of academic

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performance, transition services, participation in state and local assessments, goals and objectives, special education/related services, and educational placement. Likewise, across the meetings, the IEP document seemed to dictate roles for team members. Specifically, the special educators commonly cued the general educators to participate during the present-levels section by providing information on how the student was doing in their classrooms and cued the transition coordinator to participate during the transition section by providing information on postsecondary school and career options.

The amount of words spoken on each topic of the IEP was similar across all of the meetings. For example, the discussion of the student's present level of academic achievement and functional performance level accounted for nearly 50% of words spoken in four out of five meetings (table 4). In all five meetings, the second largest proportion of words was allocated to discussion of the transition section of the IEP document.

One student's meeting departed to some extent from the dominant script dictated by reading the IEP document, though it was structured by other IDEA-mandated documents. In Cara's meetings, a majority of the words spoken were from reading and discussing her reevaluation report, which had structure and content that was similar to the IEP document. At Cara's meeting, a sizable percentage of words were also from reading and summarizing her behavior plan (18% of words spoken). Cara's meeting was different because it more directly dealt with issues related to how the school would address disruptive behaviors. For instance, in the following excerpt from Cara's meeting, the special educator explained how she was working with the student on reflecting and apologizing for inappropriate behavior.

Special Educator: It's in here too [referring to the behavior plan] how I want to teach her skills, and we believe and have been working on this for a year with her. One of the things I did, she came to me and she gave me a paper and she talks fast.

Parent: Yeah.

Special Educator: I was listening to her, what she was saying, and there was a verbal exchange, and Ms. Bennet [a general educator] kind of lost her patience with Cara, and Cara swore at her, and walked out of the room. So I explained to Cara what went wrong, what she should have done, and how we can in the future, but then I said, "You know, Cara, Ms. Bennet has been very good to you. You have a good rapport with her. I think you need to apologize." I wasn't 100% sure how Ms. Bennet would respond—I wanted to get to her before Cara apologized so she knew it was coming, and I didn't, but it went well.

TABLE 4

Percentage of Words Spoken on Each IEP Section

	Andrew	Breann	Cara	Danielle	Erik
Procedural safeguards	1	1	1	1	1
Special considerations	0*	2	1	2	0*
Present levels	42	48	9	48	42
Transition services	25	12	8	12	25
Participation in state and local assessments	4	0*	1	0*	4
Goals and objectives	6	10	2	10	6
Special education/related services	7	10	2	10	7
Educational placement	2	6	5	6	2
Total % of words spoken	87	89	29	89	87

* Indicates less than 1%.

The discussion around Cara's behavior plan was unique in that the special educator and school psychologist did not just read and summarize from the plan but also provided examples of how the school was actively working with Cara on improving her behavior. With this being said, the special educator and school psychologist still did most of the talking, without much input from the parents or student.

When meeting discussion was not focused on the IEPs, reevaluation reports, and behavior plans, it primarily centered on topics not pertaining to the students' schooling. At the beginning and conclusion of each meeting, team members introduced one another, thanked and said good-bye to one another, and engaged in small talk (e.g., about the weather, about other children, about the parents' jobs). For example, at Breann's meeting, 11% of the words spoken were pleasantries at the beginning and end of the meeting.

Disruption of the Dominant Modes of Interaction

Our findings suggest that the special educators controlled the content and structure of IEP meetings by orchestrating team adherence to a common script. IDEA-mandated documents served as the dominant script by structuring the discourse patterns and team-member participation. To examine whether there were instances when team members exerted agency in the IEP team meeting in light of the structure imposed by the IEP document, we explored episodes of disruption, or times when participants departed from the common group dynamics and dominant script. Disruptions are important theoretically because many represent instances when marginalized actors (i.e., students and parents)

attempted to exert agency over the IEP team process. Our analysis revealed that disruptions from the IEP-determined script primarily occurred when students and parents sought or provided information regarding learning challenges and postsecondary transition. During episodes of disruption, discourse patterns changed from a formal reading of IDEA-mandated documents to authentic dialogue among team members. In addition, during some episodes of disruption, there was a significant change in the group dynamics of the meeting.

Episodes of disruption.—We identified 46 disruptions, or occasions during the meetings when discourse departed from the dominant script and patterns of interaction (table 5). Our analysis revealed that disruptions primarily related to postsecondary planning (e.g., what the student wanted to do after high school), learning challenges (e.g., issues completing reading assignments), assessments (e.g., what was meant by the state assessment scores), instructional strategies (e.g., instructional approaches and interventions to support the student), and student work (e.g., when a project for a class was due). The most common types of disruption were when a team member provided additional information on a learning challenge (13 disruptions) and discussion regarding postsecondary planning (10 disruptions). Participants disrupted the dominant script by questioning, providing additional information, seeking clarification, or providing counter information. Educators, parents, and students primarily initiated disruptions to the IEP-structured script (table 6). None of the school administrators or guidance counselors were responsible for a disruption.

Change in discourse patterns during disruptions.—During disruptions, the patterns of discourse changed, departing from those common when the dominant script was structuring the meeting: the special educators' formal reading of the IDEA-mandated documents ceased and was replaced by dialogue (i.e., a back-and-forth discussion) among team members. For example, in the following excerpt from Danielle's meeting, the special educator was reading from the present-levels-of-performance section of the student's IEP when the student interrupted the special educator to ask if her benchmark-test scores were good. Note the change from the special educator's reading of the IEP to a dialogue among multiple team members to explain the content of the IEP. Also, observe how the special educator cued the other school professionals to help her respond to the student's question.

Special Educator: Okay. “[Reading from IEP] Danielle participates in a general curriculum with nondisabled peers for all of her academics. Danielle receives the following accommodations, additional time to take tests one day, and create assignments two days, test taken in the support room with use of a calculated adaptive test, and assignments if necessary. Or, directions accompanied by written directions, peer tutoring, and support study hall. Danielle's goal is to graduate according

TABLE 5

Outcomes of Disruptions

TOPIC OF DISRUPTION	INSTANCES OF DISRUPTIONS	OUTCOMES OF DISRUPTIONS		
		Type of Outcome	Instances of Type	Instances of IEP Changes
Learning challenge	13	New understanding	10	5
		Agreement	2	0
		Clarification	0	0
		Dismissal	1	0
		Counter info	0	0
Postsecondary	10	New understanding	7	3
		Agreement	2	0
		Clarification	0	0
		Dismissal	1	0
		Counter info	0	0
Assessment	7	New understanding	5	0
		Agreement	0	0
		Clarification	1	0
		Dismissal	1	0
		Counter info	0	0
Student work	5	New understanding	4	1
		Agreement	0	0
		Clarification	0	0
		Dismissal	1	0
		Counter info	0	0
Instructional strategy	4	New understanding	3	0
		Agreement	1	0
		Clarification	0	0
		Dismissal	0	0
		Counter info	0	0
Present level	3	New understanding	1	0
		Agreement	0	0
		Clarification	0	0
		Dismissal	1	0
		Counter info	1	0
Learning strength	2	New understanding	2	2
		Agreement	0	0
		Clarification	0	0
		Dismissal	0	0
		Counter info	0	0
Learning improvement	2	New understanding	0	0
		Agreement	2	0
		Clarification	0	0
		Dismissal	0	0
		Counter info	0	0

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TABLE 6

Number of Disruptions by IEP Team Member

	Andrew	Breann	Cara	Danielle	Erik	Total per IEP Member
General educator(s)	4	4	0	1	0	9
Special educator	2	4	1	2	3	12
Parent(s)	3	1	4	5	3	16
Student	6	1	0	2	0	9
Guidance counselor	0	...	...	0	0	0
Special education supervisor	0	...	0	...	...	0
Principal	...	...	...	0	...	0
School psychologist	...	...	0	...	...	0
Transition coordinator	0	...	...	...	...	0
Vice principal	...	...	...	...	0	0
Total per meeting	15	10	5	10	6	

to district standards in June of 2013.” Then again, I indicated what her transition statement was, and what she wants to do. Now, this score was the benchmark, which taken this year, which was the baseline. Math was below basic at a score of 1140. The reading was at basic at 1170.

Student: Is this good?

Special Educator: Ms. Rae [general educator], here’s one for you.

General Educator: I’m sorry, I don’t know.

Special Educator: So, with a basic, maybe Mr. Bell [principal] can address that, on page 7, on when they take the benchmark, the Foresight Benchmarks, Mr. Bell. In math she got a below basic, okay. Then in reading, she got a basic. She wanted to know if that was—the basic was good.

Principal: No, you need proficient or advanced. That’s what you need. Okay. You need proficient or advanced, very similar to the PSSA scoring. You need proficient.

Guidance Counselor: But there’s a range for each one of those, and I don’t have that here in front of me. So, with you getting basic, in the reading, you could have potentially—you may have just been a question or two away from getting proficient in at least reading. It’s hard to tell without the cutoffs. So, in reading it looks like you’re pretty close to making proficiency.

The special educator then suggested that the parent should read aloud to the student to help improve the student's reading scores. After this, the special educator returned to her formal reading and explanation of the IEP: "On page 8, I went through with the testing for what the WIAT was on January 26." This example illustrates how this disruption, and others, resulted in a change from the special educator's dominant role of reading, summarizing, and explaining the IEP to controlling and shaping the discussion (i.e., back-and-forth exchange) among IEP team members.

Outcomes of Disrupting the Dominant Modes of Interaction

We found that the majority of the disruptions resulted in new understanding among the IEP team. Furthermore, disruptions that resulted in new understanding frequently led to changes to the students' IEPs. However, we also found that disruptions pertaining to instruction and learning were contained: participants were redirected to the dominant script and established patterns of IEP-team-member participation. Conversely, disruptions that were focused on postsecondary education and employment were welcomed: participants were often encouraged to engage in authentic discussion, which altered the dominant script and established patterns of IEP-team-member participation.

Outcomes of going off script.—When the meetings went off script, there were different and often multiple outcomes, including clarification, agreement, action, new understanding, lack of action, lack of consensus, and ignoring/avoiding (table 5). The most common outcome of the disruptions was new understanding. By *new understanding*, we mean that novel information that was not in the written IEP document was brought to the surface and discussed. For example, in the following excerpt from Cara's meeting, the disruption resulted in the team's learning that the student would like to pursue a career in the health field and participate in the school's Allied Health program. This disruption enabled the team to dispel inaccurate information that the student had received from a friend that had caused her to change her postsecondary goal from health to cosmetology. Additionally, this disruption resulted in the special educator amending the student's IEP to indicate that the student would like to pursue a career in the health field and enroll in the school's Allied Health program.

School Psychologist: Transitionally, this came from the previous information from the IEP [referring to the previous year's IEP]: "[reading from reevaluation report] she wants to work in the medical field as a doctor or nurse. She is enrolled in the Allied Health Vocational Program."

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Special Education Director: Is that—are you still thinking that as far as what you'd like to be?

Student: Mm-hmm.

Parent: I thought you told me they said that you couldn't be in Allied Health?

Student: Yeah, that's what Hannah said. She said that they never have an IEP kid.

Special Educator: Who is your friend?

Student: Hannah May.

Special Education Director: That's not true.

Special Educator: That's not true because we have students that are.

Special Education Director: Yeah, we have students everywhere in this building in every class.

Special Educator: Cosmo. When you came in the other day you told me cosmo. Oh, is that why you switched? We want to know what you really want to do. You want to do Allied Health. Is that what you want? Because I may need to make some changes too. Do you want to work in the medical field?

Student: Okay. Mm-hmm.

Later in the meeting, the special educator indicated that she changed the IEP to align with what the team had previously learned in the meeting regarding the student's goal of going into the health field.

Special Educator: Okay, now with regard to—everything else is pretty much the same information [as in the reevaluation report]. With regard to her transition, I did put in there that she does want to be in Allied Health. I had to change that because she really came down the other day and said, "I want to be in cosmo." So I was like, "Oh." So then all this transition we have, I thought, was wrong. But we will make sure it's right.

Similar to this example, disruptions that led to new understanding were characterized by the team's discussing and learning information that was not part of the written IDEA-mandated documents. Our analysis indicates that disrup-

tions resulting in new understanding were the only type of disruption that resulted in changes to the students' IEPs (table 5). Out of the 32 disruptions resulting in new understanding, 11 resulted in changes to the students' IEPs.

Characteristics of disruptions focused on learning challenges.—Further analysis of the disruption outcomes revealed that during disruptions pertaining to learning challenges, the team members' roles and agency were often maintained. This maintenance of team members' roles is highlighted in the following expert from Andrew's IEP meeting. During this exchange, the student raised a concern about what happens when he has trouble in his science class. The special educator suggested that he ask a teacher or instructional assistant for help. When the student pushed back, saying that asking the teacher does not work, the special educator shut down the discussion and returned to the dominant script, resuming reading the IEP, to change the subject.

Special Educator: “[Reading from the IEP] Andrew needs to ask for help when he doesn't understand or needs clarification on directions or concepts.” Now, Andrew, I said that mainly because of science.

Student: Right.

Special Educator: Because remember what happens in there? If you're frustrated, you'll just sit there.

Student: Yeah, because we're doing this thing with math. I know how to do the lineup and the problems, but when it comes to her and she said it's like 2.035 times 10 to the 23rd, I totally lose it. I'm like, “Okay, why?” I tried it on my calculator and she wasn't there. I had no idea what I was doing.

Special Educator: Okay, so what are the two things that I told you you could do, though?

Student: I could ask.

Special Educator: Yeah. Who are the two other people in that room that you can get help from?

Student: Mr. Ladd [special educator] and Mrs. Apples [instructional assistant].

Special Educator: Right. If a day goes bad, if you're totally lost that period—say it was today, you're totally lost, then you just leave a note and say—you can go to 144 and say, leave a note on Mr. Ladd's desk and say, “I'm confused with what happened in class today” [cut off].

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Student: Well, I'm not saying I'm lost.

Special Educator: Or ask Mrs. Apples.

Student: Yeah. I asked Mrs. Apples, but she didn't know how to do it at all.

Special Educator: Okay, but that's good because you're asking her, so if she can't do it and then Mrs. Myers [chemistry teacher] is not there, then Mr. Ladd and Mrs. Apples can [cut off].

Student: Yeah, but then she just said, "Oh, okay. Just turn it in," because I did five.

Special Educator: Oh, that's good.

The special educator then returned to the dominant script of reading from the IEP saying, "Okay. I'm gonna go through the transition section." Similar to this excerpt, other special educators would use the dominant script to maintain authority over the meetings, seemingly to avoid discussions related to teaching and learning challenges.

When learning challenges were raised in the meetings, they rarely resulted in discussion about how the school could attend to student learning needs through instructional strategies, interventions, or curriculum. Rather, in several instances, the special educator recommended and discussed something that the student or parent could do at home to address a learning challenge. For example, in the following excerpt from Danielle's meeting, the special educator read and summarizing assessment scores and stated that Danielle had trouble telling time. When the parent disrupted the script to state that her daughter could tell time, the special educator then explained that she could tell time from a digital clock but not an analog clock. The parent then questioned the importance of her daughter's needing to know how to tell time using an analog clock. The special educator did not respond to the parent, but rather stated that the parent should get a clock to work with the student at home.

Parent: She can do for the digital, but she can't do like your watch, tell time.

Special Educator: Right. So, that's—because in life, you really have to have that.

Parent: Oh, I know. You have to know how to tell time?

Special Educator: Yes. Do you guys ask her—what I started with all my kids downstairs is I might ask them 20 times a day, all the differ-

ent kids, what time is it? What time is it on the clock? Do you guys do that at home, where she—where you're asking her to tell you what time it is?

Parent: No, because all the clocks are digital. . . .

Special Educator: Maybe you can get just a regular clock from like a Walmart. Like, a real cheap one, a \$4.00 one, and just practice that daily.

After this exchange, the special educator explained that she would keep the observation that the student had issues telling time in the IEP as written, discarded the parent's opinion, and then returned to reading the IEP.

There was only one instance when a disruption pertaining to a learning issue resulted in discussion about an effective instructional strategy to attend to a student's learning needs. Although this disruption resulted in new understanding of an instructional strategy that was effective with the student, the special educator did not write it into the IEP. This occurred during Andrew's IEP meeting, when the general educator disrupted the meeting to indicate that using the jigsaw reading strategy helped Andrew successfully complete his work:

General Educator: I think when we read the stories—I think initially because I'll give him something here and there, independent reading, and it doesn't make sense, but then once we have a discussion or we'll jigsaw and break into groups and they'll—we'll translate and then his interest level, you can clearly see increases because he'll understand it.

Based upon this information, the special educator added to Andrew's IEP that he enjoyed reading but did not mention the jigsaw strategy that the general educator stated that she used to improve his reading comprehension, which in turn helped him to enjoy reading more. Across the IEP meetings, when disruptions pertaining to learning did result in changes to the students' IEPs, none of the changes involved instructional strategies, interventions, or curriculum.

Characteristics of disruptions focused on postsecondary planning.—Some instances of disruption not only enabled more authentic dialogue among team members but also promoted more meaningful involvement of the student and parent in the creation of the IEP. During these episodes of disruption, the participants' roles were less formal and defined. For example, during Danielle's meeting, the special educator was reading the student's IEP when the student disrupted the special educator to clarify that she knew what she wanted to do after high school. In this excerpt, note the change in language and how the student and parent asserted agency by actively explaining the student's postsecondary career plans. In addition, observe how the special educator took on a more passive role by acknowledging the information that the student and parent provided.

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Special Educator: “[Reading from the IEP] Danielle will obtain information regarding employment opportunities in fields of interest, for example salaried positions, benefits, work schedule. Danielle will complete a job profile in animal science position and a criminal justice, and participate in career exploration.” So, she knows—this basically sums up that she has to start knowing more about the different careers, and the areas that she’s interested in. It’s easy to say criminal justice or animal sciences, but if you don’t know the specifics—

Student: Well, I know.

Parent: She don’t do good with blood.

Student: Animal science, I want to work with the ASPCA.

Special Educator: Okay. Tell me exactly what that is.

Student: It’s basically where you go and you protect animals from like harm and danger, like cruelties, like people that hoard animals—

Special Educator: Oh, okay.

Student: That leave them. I’ve been watching [crosstalk]—

Parent: She wants to become one of those animal police.

Special Educator: Oh, okay.

Student: Like on Animal Planet [crosstalk]—*Animal Cops, Animal Hoarders*—

Special Educator: Okay, great.

The student and parent described what it entails to be an animal police officer while the special educator continued to engage by acknowledging their comments. This interaction, and others like it that related to student transition issues, departed significantly from the dominant script and, in doing so, more closely resembled the type of team process that the IEP team meeting is meant to be.

Discussion

The intent of special education policy is to ensure that students with disabilities are afforded the same, if not more, educational supports and services as their nondisabled peers. To safeguard these rights, IDEA seeks to empower students

and parents to actively participate in IEP meetings (i.e., when decisions are made about the educational services and supports a student will receive). Parents can also seek legal recourse against school districts should they feel the school is not complying with IDEA.

Nonetheless, research has repeatedly found that students and parents have little involvement in the decision-making process during IEP meetings (Goldstein et al. 1980; Lynch and Stein 1987; Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, et al. 2006; Mehan 1983; Ruppert and Gaffney 2011; Turnbull and Turnbull 1990; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Mitchell 1982; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, et al. 1982). Our findings suggest that this limited participation is perpetuated in part by the implementation of the very policy that seeks to improve student and parent involvement. Below we make sense of our findings, drawing on neo-institutional and structuration theories to illuminate why students and parents continue to have limited engagement during IEP meetings even after multiple reform efforts to improve their involvement.

First, the IEP meetings embodied an institutionalized structure that was dictated by IDEA and supporting regulations. By *institutionalized structure*, we mean a persistent mechanism of social order that influences the behavior of individuals within a given context (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Meyer and Rowan 1977). This explains why all of the IEP meetings looked and sounded so similar to one another even though they were for five students with unique learning needs being educated within two different high schools that were using distinct models for implementing full inclusion and were with IEP teams composed of different participants. In other words, despite of the diversity of these cases, the IEP meetings still looked and sounded nearly identical. This is a testament to the power of IDEA, as it is enacted locally for each child following a highly regulated protocol that is subject to legal recourse if not implemented in accordance with the federal mandates (Ramanathan 2008). The political oversight of IDEA and the threat of lawsuit contribute to its institutionalization and lead to coercive isomorphism, or pressure to act in accordance to expectations set by a governing organization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Drawing on our findings and other studies of the structure and form of IEP meetings, we posit that these institutionalized structures contribute to IEP meetings around the country having a similar look and sound as the five IEP meetings analyzed for this study, especially for high school students receiving instruction in secondary inclusive settings.

Second, the structure of the IEP meetings followed the script of IDEA-mandated documents. In other words, school professionals spent the majority of the meetings reading and explaining the documents. Ruppert and Gaffney (2011) also found that the IEP meeting they examined (in an elementary school) followed the script of the IEP document. Thus, as illuminated by Barley and Tolbert's (1997) concept of *script*, the IDEA-mandated documents governed

behavior and resulted in similar patterns of discussion and interaction during the IEP meetings. We hypothesize that the fear of legal recourse for not being compliant with IDEA drives this strict adherence to reading and summarizing the IDEA-mandated documents.

Furthermore, as Mehan (1983) also found, the language used to discuss learning and instruction was abstract. This was due, in part, to the nature of reading a legal document. There was little discussion or explanation of what this abstract language meant in terms of attending to the students' learning needs. As such, we posit that the school professionals did not elaborate on the learning and instruction of the students because they did not want to be put into a situation that could result in the students and parents requesting additional educational programs, services, and supports that are costly and time-consuming or could raise the chances of a lawsuit. For instance, at both schools, the type of special education program (i.e., full inclusion) and methods of delivering special education services (i.e., co-teaching and special-education-support study hall, and consultation and pullout for assessments) were clearly defined and fairly rigid (i.e., they rarely changed from student to student). If there were authentic dialogue about these programs and services, then the student and parent may have advocated for something that the school was unable or unwilling to do. By not engaging in concrete discussions about the schools' special education programs and services, school staff avoided having discussions about educational services.

It is likely that many students and parents lack the knowledge of special education terminology necessary to truly understand what the abstract language means. This is supported by several studies that have found that parents, who are culturally or linguistically diverse, struggle to understand the technical terminology, acronyms, and jargon used during IEP meetings (Al-Hassan and Gardner 2002; Klingner and Harry 2006; Lo 2008; Pang 2011). The use of abstract talk to describe special education services may serve as a barrier to the involvement of students and parents. In other words, the educators' presentation of information in abstract terms made it more challenging for students and parents to understand the types of instructional supports and services provided. In turn, this made it more difficult for students and parents to assert the power granted to them by IDEA and to be influential members of the IEP team (i.e., to question, counter, and advocate for educational services and supports for their children).

Third, there were instances when IEP team members went off script or broke from the dominant structure to assert their agency. Ruppap and Gaffney (2011) also noted these interruptions from the dominant script and referred to them as "conversational junctures." These episodes were marked by a change in language and additional team-member involvement. The language changed from abstract to more concrete discussion of instruction, learning, and postsecondary transition. During these moments, there was also more dialogue, or back-and-

forth exchange among team members, than dominance of the discussion by the special educator.

Disruptions often resulted in a new understanding about the learning and postsecondary transition needs of students. Disruptions that resulted in new understanding among IEP team members commonly led to changes to the students' IEPs. However, disruptions that pertained to learning and instruction tended to be brief, because the special educators would quickly reclaim control. When IEP team members attempted to break from the dominant script and its attendant power dynamics by asking questions, providing new or contrary information, or expressing an opinion regarding instruction and learning, the special educator used the IDEA-mandated documents to close down discussions. Yet, during disruptions that were focused on postsecondary transition, we found that the special educators generally encouraged the students to engage in a discussion about postsecondary planning. In several of these instances, the established patterns of IEP team member participation changed, with the students taking on a more active role and the special educator assuming a more passive role.

Based upon our findings and other research that has examined the implementation of special education policy, we conjecture that several factors contributed to why school professionals were more likely to shut down discussion regarding instruction and learning but encourage discussion pertaining to postsecondary transition. To begin with, the legal history of special education places school professionals in a potentially precarious position as advocates for the needs of students but also gatekeepers to schools' finite resources (Harry et al. 1995). Encouraging and engaging in authentic discussion about questions related to teaching and learning could open the possibility of students' and parents' requesting the implementation of potentially costly and time-consuming instructional practices and programs.

In addition, the educational field lacks research-based instructional practices and interventions to attend to the unique learning needs of high school students, which may result in school professionals not having access to instructional strategies, curricula, and interventions to address students' learning challenges. Research in special education has focused much more on early intervention and the primary grades than on identifying and understanding the best instructional practices for high school students (Conderman and Katsiyannis 2002). This may also result in a belief among school professionals that high school students "know what they know" and that there is not much that a school can do to improve learning outcomes.

Furthermore, the special educators may have felt uncomfortable discussing instruction and learning given that, at both schools, the general educators were primarily in charge of the students' instruction. As such, the special educators may not have had the content-level and instructional expertise to discuss the

students' learning challenges in the context of the multiple courses that the students were enrolled in (Mastropieri et al. 2005). Likewise, writing an instructional strategy or intervention into the IEP would mean that it would have to be implemented by the general educators, who may lack the knowledge, experience, or time to implement individualized strategies or interventions (Idol 2006).

Meanwhile, disruptions pertaining to postsecondary planning were likely encouraged in part because of the emphasis of transition planning in IDEA. Over the past two reauthorizations of IDEA, focus has increasingly been on providing students with an increased role in planning for their transition (Smith 2005). This has resulted in training and oversight by state departments of education to ensure that schools are discussing and planning for postsecondary transition during IEP meetings. Moreover, school professionals may have been more likely to engage in discussions regarding postsecondary planning given that the students and parents were the primary actors of implementation. In other words, the students and parents, rather than the school, were principally in control of what the student would do after high school. Consequently, during the IEP meetings, the school professionals maintained jurisdiction over the instruction of the students, and students and parents were positioned to have increased responsibility over the student's postsecondary careers and education.

Overall, our findings indicate that the intent of IDEA to provide students and parents with power to advocate for equitable services during IEP meetings is predominantly a ceremonial myth. As stated by Meyer and Rowan (1977, 340), "to maintain ceremonial conformity, organizations that reflect institutional rules tend to buffer their formal structures from the uncertainties of technical activities by becoming loosely coupled, building gaps between their formal structures and actual work activities." Thus, the structure of the IEP meetings was tightly coupled to the IDEA-mandated documents but loosely coupled to the technical core of instruction and learning. Ultimately, by strictly adhering to the script of the IDEA-mandated documents, the school professionals' actions were validated, as they were following federal mandate. Furthermore, the school districts buffered themselves against having to potentially implement costly and time-consuming educational supports and services, and against lawsuits. In doing so, they also limited the students' and parents' involvement in the process and reduced their ability to advocate for equitable services.

Future Work

Students' lack of participation during IEP meetings is particularly troublesome given that, after high school, the structure and script of the IEP meetings no longer exists (IDEA mandates extend only through high school). Students, who

have for years been conditioned to play a passive role in their education, are then left ill equipped to enter a world in which they must take on an active role in explaining their disabilities, planning for and achieving goals, and advocating for instructional and occupational accommodations. As such, the recent intervention work that seeks to improve student participation during IEP meetings is essential (Horn et al. 2000; Martin, Van Dycke, Christensen et al. 2006; Mason et al. 2002). Our findings provide theoretical insights to understand the effectiveness of these interventions.

Our findings also suggest that future interventions, policies, and training aiming to improve student participation during IEP meetings should actively seek to disrupt and alter the dominant structure and script of the IEP meetings. If the institutionalized nature of the IEP meetings is not accounted for, we hypothesize that although students may appear to be more actively involved during IEP meetings, their input may not result in meaningful changes to the information that is written into their IEPs, particularly regarding their instruction. For example, we can envision students being provided with IEPs written by special educators and then prompted to read and discuss IEPs with the other team members during the meetings. Superficially, this may give the impression of a more dynamic team meeting (e.g., more words spoken by the student), but it would essentially just be a reproduction of the status quo in which the students are marginalized by their reading of a script that was written for and about them.

Likewise, our findings suggest that to significantly alter the structure and group dynamics of IEP meetings, there should be an institutional rescripting of the IEP meeting. This rescripting should recast participants in new and dynamic roles that shift and redistribute agency among IEP team members. To do this, interventions should seek to promote discussion beyond the formal script of the IEP. This would require increased transparency of and ongoing accessibility to the information written in the IEP. The IEP meeting format also needs to fundamentally change to encourage more active and ongoing participation beyond just a yearly meeting and to alter how information is generated, shared, and discussed. As we continue to develop theory to better understand why IEP meetings depart from the robust team processes they were intended to be, we create opportunities for reform that reshape roles and patterns of interaction among educators, parents, and students that enable the creation of substantive plans for the education of students with disabilities.

Note

1. In consultation models, special educators serve as consultants to general educators, who are responsible for instruction. In co-taught models, special and general educators share responsibility for classroom instruction.

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