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1-9-2023

Role Play: Actualizing the IEP Meeting for Pre-Service Teachers

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Recommended APA Citation

Toledo, C. A. (2023). Role Play: Actualizing the IEP Meeting for Pre-Service Teachers. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(1), 92-109. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5635>

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Role Play: Actualizing the IEP Meeting for Pre-Service Teachers

Abstract

Teacher preparation programs provide numerous teaching and learning opportunities for pre-service teachers; however, participating in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is not an experience that can be guaranteed. Leading and participating in IEP meetings are a responsibility that all special education teachers will be held accountable for, but many pre-service teachers will never be able to observe a real IEP meeting before entering the field. In this qualitative case study, the researcher utilizes a simulated IEP meeting to provide pre-service teachers with experience in participating in an IEP meeting prior to entering the profession. The case study method is utilized to examine the perceptions and experiences of pre-service teachers following the simulated IEP meeting experience. Findings in this study support the use of role-play in developing a greater understanding of the IEP process, from program development to the IEP meeting itself.

Keywords

teacher preparation, role-play, qualitative case study, special education

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Peggy Shannon-Baker, who has provided me with guidance and support in becoming a qualitative researcher. In addition, this study would not have been possible without the ongoing support of my writing group, who have believed in my abilities and helped me to see the bigger picture.

Role Play: Actualizing the IEP Meeting for Pre-Service Teachers

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Teacher preparation programs provide numerous teaching and learning opportunities for pre-service teachers; however, participating in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is not an experience that can be guaranteed. Leading and participating in IEP meetings are a responsibility that all special education teachers will be held accountable for, but many pre-service teachers will never be able to observe a real IEP meeting before entering the field. In this qualitative case study, the researcher utilizes a simulated IEP meeting to provide pre-service teachers with experience in participating in an IEP meeting prior to entering the profession. The case study method is utilized to examine the perceptions and experiences of pre-service teachers following the simulated IEP meeting experience. Findings in this study support the use of role-play in developing a greater understanding of the IEP process, from program development to the IEP meeting itself.

Keywords: teacher preparation, role-play, qualitative case study, special education

Introduction

Special education teacher preparation programs provide pre-service teachers (PSTs) with opportunities for teaching, lesson planning, practicing classroom management, writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and so much more. In the teacher preparation program where I teach, PSTs gain hands-on practice planning and teaching lesson plans as part of required course activities. However, PSTs are not guaranteed the opportunity to lead or even participate in an IEP meeting due to concerns about confidentiality and scheduling with our school partnerships. Each semester when I ask PSTs in my Special Education Procedures course if they have attended an IEP meeting, usually only one to two hands are raised. Having experienced firsthand the fear of being a first-year teacher and being tasked with leading an IEP meeting for the first time, I was determined to mitigate this gap in teacher preparation. I decided to create an interactive experience for the PSTs enrolled in my course to experience preparing for, and participating in, an IEP meeting for students with disabilities. This interactive experience allows PSTs to demonstrate leadership skills and develop an understanding of the IEP process by taking on the role of an IEP team member and engaging in a simulated IEP meeting.

The purpose of this research was to explore special education PSTs' knowledge and understanding of IEP meetings after participating in a simulated IEP meeting. Research on the use of role-play and experiential learning as well as the importance of reflective practice in teacher education informed the design and implementation of the IEP simulation. The educational practice studied through this research was the use of simulated IEP meetings as a method for teaching special education PSTs how to conduct and participate in an IEP meeting. More specifically, the research question guiding this study was: How do pre-service teachers

describe their experiences following a simulated IEP meeting in an undergraduate teacher preparation program?

Literature Review

Experiential Learning Theory

This study is rooted in experiential learning theory with the belief that active engagement with the subject matter is an effective way to engage learners in the learning process. Keeton and Tate (1978) explain that experiential learning allows learners to be “directly in touch with the realities being studied. It is contrasted with the learner who only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about these realities” (p. 2). Being immersed in an experience, such as role-play, goes beyond passive learning activities and gets students directly involved in the learning process. Experiential learning activities can happen inside and outside of the classroom and involves students “doing” rather than “observing” (Keeton & Tate, 1978). Where passive learning activities involve the subject matter being imparted “onto” the learner, experiential learning engages the educator and learners “with” the subject matter (Kolb & Kolb, 2017a). The subject matter is experienced in a way that produces learning through participation. Dewey (2018) likens experiential learning to an experiment, where participants make discoveries about what that world experience is like. The experience itself becomes the teacher, and learners can gain an understanding of the outcomes of their actions as well as the actions of others. Participating in new and repeated experiences allows learners to make connections and inform their future experiences.

There are a few foundational beliefs that ground experiential learning theory. Kolb and Kolb (2009) identify these foundational beliefs as: (a) learning is a process, (b) learning involves multiple opportunities, (c) learning involves conflict resolution, (d) learning involves adapting one’s beliefs, (e) learning is a result of engagement with the environment and people within environments, and (f) learning results in knowledge creation. Evident here is the cyclical process of experiential learning wherein the experience is a complex, engaging process involving numerous cycles of trial and error. These beliefs should ground the development of experiential learning activities. Kolb and Kolb (2017b) contrast the experiential learning cycle to the linear cycle of learning, where the learner is a passive recipient of knowledge. In contrast, the experiential learning cycle creates a unique experience connecting the learner, the educator, and the subject matter (Kolb & Kolb, 2017b).

Experiential learning theorists believe that knowledge is constructed through not only experience but how one understands and makes sense of those experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). To experience something is only part of the learning process and must be coupled with reflection to lead to greater understanding. When teachers reflect, they can make informed decisions about their teaching methods (Krapivnyk et al., 2021). When one engages in reflection, each reflective thought links to a new thought or action to be taken. Learning involves change through the consciousness of the consequences of that experience (Dewey, 2018). Schön (1983) identified two forms of reflection: “reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.” The latter focuses on reflecting on an event or teaching experience to analyze and evaluate one’s performance. “Reflection-on-action” serves as a medium for teachers to reflect on past experiences to make improvements moving forward. O’Brien et al. (2021) agree with this method of reflection, noting that it allowed participants in their study to become more aware of their individual performance, considering their personal strengths and weaknesses following a hands-on experience. Through reflections, PSTs can identify and grow following their mistakes and adjust in the future as needed (Karatepe & Yilmaz, 2018). Through honest

reflections on their performance, students can make improvements in the future to create positive change.

Experiential learning has many benefits for learners. In one study on the role of emotions in experiential learning activities, Finch et al. (2014) found that experiential learning activities with a group element support learners in building interdependency, something often necessary in the workplace. In addition, these activities supported the development of collaborative skills such as leadership and effective discourse among their participants (Finch et al., 2014). When learners work collaboratively during an experiential learning activity, they are more likely to build additional functional skill sets outside of the subject matter alone. One example of an experiential learning activity where students work as a group is role-play.

Role-Play in Education

Simulation-based learning environments allow students to engage in an activity that mirrors what they would see in a real-world setting. Not only can simulation-based learning experiences be fun and engaging for learners, but application-based activities where students apply their knowledge and collaborate with others are required components of teacher preparation programs (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2020). Various conflicts and situations can be recreated within a simulated learning environment allowing the experience to reflect reality (Duchatelet et al., 2021). Their study utilized a four-day simulation to support undergraduate and graduate students in utilizing negotiation techniques to enhance participants' self-efficacy in this area. Duchatelet et al. (2021) found that by experiencing a simulated version of reality, participants can examine the impact that their actions had on others, positively contributing to their overall learning. Similarly, Schussler et al. (2017) studied the use of a virtual simulation to support pre-service teachers in responding to classroom bullying incidents. They found that the simulation-based learning activity improved the students' abilities in using academic discourse during acute moments.

Role-play, one type of simulation-based learning activity (Lean et al., 2006), is an active learning strategy that involves students participating in each scenario with a given role and can be conducted with or without the use of advanced technology. During role-play activities, participants take on the persona of a specific role based on a scenario or description and engage with others who have also taken on various roles (Duchatelet et al., 2021). During these interactions with one another, learners can experience an authentic scenario that requires them to think on their feet, resulting in a greater understanding of the process (Radford & Stevens, 1988). Role-play supports students in learning how to respond to an event, problem, or issue in such a way that they can learn from the experience and their actions. These types of activities typically allow students to take on roles they might not otherwise have experienced before. Understanding various roles within a specific professional context involves demonstrating a variety of skill sets (Chernikova et al., 2020). Although the different roles require a range of professional knowledge and life experiences, providing students with the opportunities to problem solve with professional judgement and learn collaboration skills is a critical aspect of any profession (Chernikova et al., 2020). A student's behavior during a role-play activity can be impacted by the environment, other participants, and even the function or purpose of their assigned role (Krebt, 2017). It is important to plan and think through these various factors when considering a role-play activity.

Engaging in a role-play experience supports critical thinking skills and helps develop an understanding of others' perspectives (Rashid & Qaisar, 2017). Role-play activities place students in roles that they otherwise might not have, which allows them to understand what the experience is like from a new perspective. Students can step out of their own traditional roles as learners and start to gain an understanding of all participants in the shared experience

(Rashid & Qaisar, 2017). When engaged in a shared experience, participants can solve problems together as a collaborative effort, which enhances communication and collaboration skills (Chernikova et al., 2020). This involves engagement in the role-play activity with set guidelines followed by time to reflect on the experience to support learners in making sense of the event (Chernikova et al., 2020). Individual reflection can provide a space for self-analysis of an experience and allows PSTs to make connections between theory and practice.

Role-play has long been utilized in education as a teaching tool. Krebt (2017) found that the role-play activity improved learning outcomes for students learning English as a second language. One element of the role-play that specifically impacted learning outcomes for students was the community framework of the activity, which prompted students to engage in high levels of collaboration. Role-play activities allow team members to support one another and learn from one another, creating a positive experience and promoting collaboration.

Simulated IEP Meetings in Teacher Preparation

Although limited, prior research on simulated IEP meetings for PSTs have been utilized to support an enhanced understanding of the IEP meeting experience. One way that researchers have incorporated IEP meeting simulations was by utilizing trained actors to work alongside PSTs during the role-play activity. In Holdren's (2017) study, actors played the role of parents in each simulated IEP meeting while four special education PST participants engaged in the IEP meetings in the role of the special education teacher. Other members of the research team with extensive experience in IEP meeting participation took on the roles of other IEP team members, including administrators, general education teachers, related service providers, and more. This study investigated various aspects of the IEP process, including whether candidates could learn to encourage parent participation and successfully complete the necessary components of an IEP meeting. Results of Holdren's (2017) study demonstrated that the simulated IEP meeting experience allowed PSTs to practice the use of a strategy to encourage parent participation and allowed them to develop their skills in facilitating an IEP meeting in a more comfortable setting. However, PSTs in this study only had the opportunity to play the role of the special education teacher.

Dotger and Smith (2009) studied the effects of a simulated conference between PSTs and parent actors to address the communication gap that exists between parents and teachers. This qualitative study analyzed PSTs' experiences in relation to their developing teacher identity and found that the participants experienced identity confusion and a reliance on other professionals in the face of difficult conversations. Dotger and Smith (2009) recommend that teacher educators provide PSTs with experiences outside of the field and traditional classroom activities to help them practice utilizing their professional judgment in a variety of situations. An IEP meeting would be an example of one of the complex simulations that the authors suggest where PSTs are placed in a position where they make professional judgments. In a later study, Dotger (2011) utilized a "standardized parent" to engage with PSTs in a variety of settings and found that these experiences enhanced their understanding of their individual teacher identities. Simulated meetings allow PSTs to reflect on their actions and learn the underlying rules of the role that they are supposed to take during various situations.

One recent example of a simulated IEP meeting utilized real parents of children with disabilities to support PSTs in collaborating in an IEP meeting. Mueller et al. (2019) conducted their simulated IEP meetings with members of the community who were parents of children with disabilities, which enhanced the authenticity of the experience for PSTs. Results of this study suggest that the simulated IEP meeting helped the participants bridge the gap between theory and practice, provided PSTs with real-world experience, and prepared them for the future. Mueller et al. (2019) called for future research on the use of simulated IEP meetings

with different student populations and other contexts to deepen the field's knowledge of how these experiences impact PST's learning. One other way to enhance the role-play experience is through reflection.

Following a simulated experience, reflection can help participants self-assess and consider their successes and areas in need of improvement. Duchatelet et al. (2021) recommend using a reflection tool for self-assessments, such as a diary, which can help enhance self-efficacy and support students in developing a great understanding of their individual performance. Throughout the simulated IEP meeting, PSTs were asked to write a reflection, involving a self-assessment component. Using reflection, PSTs can then develop a greater understanding of both their roles and those of others.

Mueller and Vick (2019) conducted a study on facilitated IEP meetings with in-service teachers, where they explored the experiences of IEP team members after having an IEP facilitator support them during IEP meetings. They found that the facilitated IEP meeting supported the teachers by involving parents throughout the meeting, helped them stay organized, and supported them in making decisions effectively. Mueller and Vick (2019) argue that teacher educators must provide experiences that engage PSTs in the IEP process from the production of the IEP through the IEP meeting to prepare them for the future (Mueller & Vick, 2019). The present study directly addresses this call to action. Throughout this study, experiential learning theory was utilized to build an IEP meeting role-play activity to engage PSTs and describe their experiences to inform future teaching. It builds off previous research on simulated IEP meetings by having each PST serve as the various IEP team member roles instead of using outside participants engaging in the other roles. Having PSTs serve as each IEP team member was chosen to allow PSTs the opportunity to demonstrate an understanding of the various IEP team member roles and responsibilities. In addition, it includes a reflection component that allows PSTs to consider their strengths and weaknesses as an individual as well as a member of the team. The research question guiding this study was: How do pre-service teachers describe their experiences following a simulated IEP meeting in an undergraduate teacher preparation program?

Autobiographical Significance

Prior to my transition into teacher preparation, I served as a special education teacher in the elementary school setting for five years. I spent my first two years as a general education teacher and was excited to transition into my new role doing what I had ultimately always wanted to do. Thinking back on my first IEP meeting, my heart starts to race all over again and I admittedly still feel how clammy my palms were. It was my second-year teaching and having never even witnessed an IEP meeting, I was now tasked with leading one on my own. I recalled sitting at the table with four of my much more experienced colleagues as well as the child's family and feeling distinctly as though I did not belong there. I had successfully repressed this challenging day from memory with each IEP meeting that followed where I improved and gained more confidence. As I began teaching future teachers about IEPs and IEP meetings, thoughts about my first IEP meeting crept back into the forefront. Reflecting on this experience and learning that many of my students also were not observing IEP meetings in their field experiences, I felt it necessary to change those circumstances for the future teachers I was teaching. While PSTs may not always be afforded the opportunity to participate in a real IEP meeting prior to entering the profession, I felt that perhaps the fears and feelings of unease that I experienced could be diminished through role-play. After the first round of IEP meetings conducted for this study, I read my students' reflections and realized how valuable this trial run was to so many of them. My students' reactions and excitement for their future roles as special education teachers reassured me that the project was meaningful and helpful. This project stems

from my personal experience with leading my first IEP meeting as well as all subsequent IEP meetings that followed and has greatly contributed to the development of the present research. My intention with this project is to set the stage for PSTs to feel more equipped for their future IEP meetings and to share their experiences with others who hope to alter the course for other PSTs through role-play.

Methods

The present study utilized a qualitative case study research approach to investigate the experiences that PSTs described after engaging in a simulated IEP meeting through qualitative written reflections. Qualitative case study research has been defined as an approach that examines a bounded case within a contemporary or real-life setting (Yin, 2018). The bounded case to be studied could range from one individual to a group of people and must have clearly identifiable boundaries of who is included and who is not (Creswell, 2013). These boundaries involve a case with clear parameters of time and place. Qualitative case study method is appropriate when the researcher seeks to explain and describe a social phenomenon in-depth (Yin, 2018). Therefore, the bounded case must have attributes that seek to be explored in greater detail to arrive with a complete description of the case (Creswell, 2013). Questions that ask “how” and “why” in reference to a social phenomenon are best suited for case study research (Yin, 2018). These types of questions should result in an in-depth description of the bounded case and offer readers a greater understanding of the phenomena within the case (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative case study worked well for the present study as it seeks to describe in detail the bounded case described within the following section. The research question guiding this study was: How do pre-service teachers describe their experiences following a simulated IEP meeting in an undergraduate teacher preparation program?

Setting and Participants

This study took place at a university in the southeast region of the United States. The bounded case included junior-level undergraduate PSTs in the Special Education Teacher Preparation Program. The case was bounded by time and place, as all participants were enrolled in SPED 3134: Special Education Procedures during the fall 2019 semester. There was a total of 17 PSTs enrolled in the course whose demographic makeup represents the overall makeup of the college itself. Within our undergraduate special education program, these demographics were 86.7% white, 6.7% black or African American, and 5.6% Hispanic (Georgia Southern University, 2021). 91.1% of the undergraduate students within the special education program were female and 8.9% were male (Georgia Southern University Office of Institutional Research, 2021). Archival data from all 17 PSTs from this course were included within the present study after obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. During the semester, the students in this cohort were also enrolled in a field placement (30 semester hours), a course focused on the characteristics of learners with disabilities, as well as a course focused on assessing students with disabilities using various instruments. I served as the course instructor for Special Education Procedures and the sole researcher reporting on this experience.

Procedure

The data shared within this study was collected after the students received course instruction about IEPs and participated in their simulated IEP team meetings. The simulated IEP meeting is an in-class opportunity for PSTs to gain experience engaging in an IEP meeting, reflective of the ones they will participate in as future special education teachers. As part of a

regular course assignment, the participants engaged in numerous class activities to prepare for the simulated IEP meeting. Participants received direct instruction on what IEPs are, including their purpose, and viewed sample IEPs as well as a video of an IEP meeting to gain the necessary background information. Following direct instruction, participants formed IEP teams of three to five members and self-selected roles for the meeting from the following options: Special education co-teacher, general education co-teacher, parent, school psychologist, and special education resource teacher (Toledo, 2021).

Participants were provided with a partially completed IEP document for their case student and were required to complete the remaining sections (parent concerns, goals and objectives, services, accommodations, and statewide testing determination). In addition, an agenda of the necessary components of the IEP meeting was provided to students along with class time to rehearse the meeting. Finally, each IEP team conducted their simulated IEP meeting in a private setting with only the IEP team and course instructor present. The goals of each IEP meeting were to conduct an annual IEP meeting, either initial or re-evaluation, depending on the case student given to each group. Throughout each 20-minute IEP meeting, the instructor handed various IEP team members “unexpected occurrence cards,” which prompted select team member to engage in a certain behavior or initiate a conversation on a given topic (Toledo, 2021). These are designed specifically for each unique case student and provide real-world events that happen in IEP meetings (e.g., Picking students up from specials; clarifying test results interpretations; parent concerns; Toledo, 2021). The unexpected occurrence cards were utilized to provide participants with a realistic situation that they may face in a real IEP meeting, which required them to think on their feet and work collaboratively. Following the IEP meeting, each participant produced a one to two-page reflection outside of class time, submitted one week following the meeting. After reading the students’ reflections, I realized the impact that this experience had on them and submitted a request to use their reflections as archival data through the university’s IRB. I obtained IRB approval for the use of all 17 student reflections as my data set. Due to the archival nature of this study, data collection was limited to the student reflections, which is described in greater detail below.

Data Collection

Data collection for this qualitative case study included (n = 17) student reflections following the IEP meeting during the fall of 2019, which were approved for use through the IRB application process. Archival data, such as the students’ reflections used in this study, are intended to provide description and explanation of the phenomenon under study (Timothy, 2012). Student reflections allowed me to describe and explain the experiences of PSTs following the IEP simulation with more accuracy than my observations of their experiences would provide. Documentary analysis involves studying documents, in this case written reflections, and are interpreted much like interview transcripts (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Documentary analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) provides a way for researchers to rely on the voices of participants to understand their experiences. While observations and a debrief session were part of the course activity, this data was not formally collected or maintained due to the archival nature of the study and therefore was not included. The reflections were analyzed for emerging patterns on participants’ perspectives after participating in the simulated IEP meeting. The reflection prompts are shown below in Figure 1.0. After obtaining IRB approval and prior to analysis, an administrative assistant anonymized the data by removing all student identifying information to protect the identity of the participants.

Figure 1.0*Simulated IEP Reflection Prompt*

You will write a 4-paragraph reflection (1-2 pages) based on your experience during the Mock IEP meeting. The reflection should include the following:

- Provide the definition and an explanation of what an Individualized Education Plan is. You will also include an explanation regarding the importance of an IEP.
- Describe your overall perception of the Mock IEP experience. Include what your role was for the meeting and your feelings towards how the meeting went.
- Provide an explanation of what occurred during the meeting. You should provide explicit examples of 2-3 decisions that were made as well as any major events that occurred.
- You will end your reflection with a description of what you would do the same and differently if you were given the opportunity to conduct this IEP meeting again. Additionally, share any major takeaways that you gained from this experience.

Data Analysis

After collecting the anonymized work samples, the researcher read across the entire data set to identify major themes connected to the use of simulated IEP meetings in a teacher preparation program. An inductive approach was used, where the data were read and coded for comprehensive themes to explain the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Three rounds of coding were conducted to develop a thorough understanding of the data. The initial round of coding used In Vivo codes, which use participants' actual statements derived from the data (Saldaña, 2016). To better understand the experiences of participants who engaged in a simulated IEP meeting, In Vivo codes were appropriate in revealing the details from the voices of the participants (Saldaña, 2016). This also allowed patterns and outliers to emerge in the data right from the start. Descriptive coding was used in the second and third rounds of coding, which takes words, phrases, and sentences from the data and develops general topics (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding methods helped summarize the big ideas found from the In Vivo codes to make the data more manageable and served as an organizational tool to identify similarities more easily among the data (Saldaña, 2016). Three comprehensive themes were developed after condensing the descriptive codes into broader, overarching ideas: (a) Understanding the Process, (b) Understanding the Roles, and (c) Enhanced Sense of Confidence.

Quality Assurance Measures

To ensure quality of the case study, I used a few different tactics recommended by Yin (2018) to help enhance trustworthiness. One way I was able to ensure reliability was by establishing a clear understanding of the issue being studied. As I read through the data, I focused the problem of pre-service teacher preparation at the forefront of my mind to keep an eye out for any themes or outliers. Interpreting the data as it is being collected and analyzed to identify incongruencies within the data is a critical aspect of keeping the issue clear and

consistent (Yin, 2018). Another reliability measure is the development of a case study protocol (Yin, 2018). A case study protocol includes an outline of the literature, research methods, and data collection tools that clearly identifies the research practices used. Yin's (2018) sample aligns with the IRB application required by my university and was therefore fully reviewed prior to conducting research. Although only one data source was utilized for this study, I used Yin's (2018) recommendations for strengthening documentation data sources. These include being easily accessible, unobtrusive for participants, and detailed.

While many of these quality control measures were used during data collection, some were also put in place during the data analysis phase. One way I enhanced reliability as I worked through the data analysis process was by sharing my preliminary findings with "critical friends" (Yin, 2018, p. 87). Yin (2018) recommends this tactic to allow colleagues to provide feedback and reduce researcher bias. In addition, as I sifted through the data, I created memos. Memos involve jotting down ideas and thoughts about the data that come throughout the analysis process (Yin, 2018). This assisted me in thinking about the data during times where I was away from it without letting those critical ideas slip away. Finally, I approached this qualitative case study as an iterative process, involving three coding cycles and reviewing the data as well as my notes. An iterative explanation building process is recommended to support researchers in comparing findings to initial claims and continuously revising and revising the findings to sure fluidity (Yin, 2018).

Findings

The findings of this pilot study demonstrate that PSTs who participated in a simulated IEP meeting developed a greater understanding of the IEP process, the IEP team members, and experience an enhanced sense of their confidence. The findings described below are organized into three comprehensive themes as identified above. Gender neutral pronouns (they/their) are used to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Participant titles from each of the four IEP teams, such as "school psychologist," "parent," "special education teacher," and "general education teacher," were be used interchangeably to identify any of the participants who played in those roles as the various roles shared similar types of reactions to the reflection prompts.

Understanding the Process

The most notable outcome was that all IEP teams demonstrated a deeper understanding of the IEP process, including the development of the IEP and facilitating the IEP meeting. Across the data, it was evident that PSTs demonstrated an understanding of what an IEP is and how it relates to student success. While each participant defined an IEP in their own way, they each mentioned how the IEP to supports the success of students with disabilities. For example, one participant reflected that "An IEP is important because it helps ensure that [students in] special education are getting the help they need in order to be successful" (special education teacher reflection). This statement exemplifies what other participants agreed to be the major importance and benefit of IEPs. When students with disabilities have a plan in place, they can make progress in school.

In addition to the understanding of the development of an IEP, participants demonstrated a deeper understanding of what takes place during an IEP meeting. One participant stated that she has "never seen an IEP take place" and that "having this experience really helped put things in perspective" (parent reflection). Being able to experience a simulated IEP meeting allowed the participants to gain a better understanding of what it is like to participate in a real IEP meeting. Another participant had the same revelation, explaining that "...it prepared me for what an actual IEP meeting would look like. I was allowed in my

[field] placement to sit in and it was pretty much exactly like our mock IEP assignment” (school psychologist reflection). When PSTs make connections between coursework and their field experiences, they can more meaningfully understand the experience. This was reflected similarly in another participant reflection who stated:

I found this assignment to be really informative, and I got a lot of good experience with it. From actually planning and writing the IEP to presenting it to the parent at the IEP meeting, I gained valuable lessons throughout the project. (Special education teacher reflection)

This participant acknowledged that the whole process helped them understand the connection between the preparation for and facilitation of the IEP meeting.

Participants also reflected positively on their feelings about their understanding of the IEP process. One participant shared that “overall, I really enjoyed this learning experience and feel more comfortable with the concept of IEP’s” (parent reflection). Another participant agreed:

I honestly learned more about IEPs in this assignment than I have in my entire time in the education program. Having that hands on experience that resembled real life was extremely productive for me, and I truly felt that this assignment changed the way I think about IEPs. (Special education resource teacher reflection)

This participant noted that it was the role-play experiential learning activity that supported their understanding of IEPs. In addition, because the assignment was reflective of something that each participant will experience in their future careers, this had a greater impact. A second theme revealed that participants demonstrated an understanding of the IEP team members involved in the process.

Understanding the Roles

Along with developing a greater understanding of the IEP process, participants demonstrated a greater understanding of the various team members involved in IEP meetings. Whether PSTs felt like they knew a lot about their role to begin with or were not sure what their function was within the group dynamic, all PSTs reflected on their enhanced understanding of their role. For example, one participant reflected:

My role for the meeting was a general education teacher. I felt a lot of confusion initially about the role of a general education teacher in the IEP meeting. Most of my knowledge about IEP was in the perspective as a special education teacher, which is why I felt nervous towards the whole thing. Despite this, however, I felt that the meeting flowed smoothly for the most part and I began to understand my role more as I was playing it. (General education teacher reflection)

This statement reflects the transformation that occurred during the simulated IEP meeting. Although this student was not clear on how a general education teacher should participate in the IEP meeting, they left the meeting with a greater understanding of what that role looks entails.

Perhaps most significantly, all participants deepened their understanding of parents' role in the IEP, recognizing that parents are a valuable and integral participant in the IEP process. One participant commented that "In order for the student to get the most out of their IEP it is crucial that parents and teachers work together to address concerns and agree on goals" (parent reflection). Participants realized that the parent has a unique perspective to bring to the table and valuing that role is important to address the needs of the whole child, not just what the teachers see in the classroom. One parent participant reflected that taking on this specific role "helped me imagine what it is really like to be the parent in that position and the concerns they may have regarding their child's IEP" (reflection). Although PSTs are frequently placed in situations where they can enact the role of the teacher, taking on the role of the parent was a unique experience for participants. In this example, taking on a unique role demonstrated to be an effective way of developing empathy for the parents in IEP meetings. The other participants who were able to experience working with a "parent" during the simulation learned what it was like to navigate uncomfortable situations or disagreements that they might bring to the table:

One of our curve balls was a frustrated parent ranting her concerns... We overcame that obstacle by agreeing with the parent, as her demands were not unreasonable.... The mother also asked to change a few things, including how often she would be notified of her child's progress, but that was not a big issue to overcome. (School psychologist reflection)

Taking a collaborative approach to working with parents and other professionals in a low stakes environment like this allowed the participants to experience what it is like to use professional judgement to compromise and develop a mutual understanding.

Each participant also reflected on their role and accompanying responsibilities. For example, one special education teacher participant shared that "my job was to lead the meeting and help with transitioning from one area of concern to another. I also help[ed] our special education self-contained and general [education] teacher when parental concerns came up" (reflection). This reflection, in conjunction with others, demonstrated the participant's ability to understand their role and how it works alongside the role of others. When participants experienced unexpected occurrences, one special education teacher participant reflected on their ability to collaborate with others:

I feel like there is so much more to learn, but I am proud of myself for the way I performed in this first-time experience especially by having the ability to compromise and elaborate for the parent's wants and concerns. (Reflection)

Having a simulated experience with unexpected occurrences allowed participants opportunities to work collaboratively to problem solve and compromise.

The unexpected occurrences also provided participants with an enhanced understanding of each team member's individual role. The school psychologist participant was given an unexpected occurrence card during the meeting where the parent asked for clarification regarding test scores. The participant reflected on their performance, explaining that "I should have included a few more examples, just because in a real situation, the parents might not have fully understood" (school psychologist reflection). This reflection demonstrates the participant's ability to reflect on how their performance impacts others and revealed an enhanced understanding of the role of the school psychologist. In addition, the reflection allowed the participant to identify areas of their practice that they would adjust in future situations. This was like the special education teacher participant, who explained that:

I did not realize how much of a crucial role the SPED teacher plays until after the meeting was over. Some of the things that I had to do was lead and organize the meeting, know what to do when certain situations came up, and made sure the parent was thoroughly involved and comfortable in the meeting, and because I had to do these things all at once, I came to realize how difficult it was and how much I had to be aware and stay on my toes. (Reflection)

In this example, the participant came to learn and appreciate the responsibilities that special education teachers do before and during IEP meetings. Although course instruction has taught them about these roles and responsibilities, putting these responsibilities into action during a simulated IEP meeting allowed them to develop an elevated understanding. The simulated IEP meeting supported participants in understanding the value of the roles of each team member. Engaging in a simulated experience of a future non-teaching task allowed these pre-service teachers to gain a better understanding of the roles of all IEP team members.

Enhanced Sense of Confidence

The final theme revealed an enhanced sense of confidence perceived by the participants in their ability to be successful special education teachers because of this simulated experience. One participant reflected that:

Leaving the Mock IEP, I felt super confident in knowing how to run an IEP meeting and what all of the roles are. I feel like this assignment really prepared me for real life and prepared me for a real IEP meeting when I become a special education teacher. (School psychologist reflection)

Feeling of confidence was evident among other participants, as one participant shared that “doing this activity made it so much easier and less scary, as if it’s something I can actually accomplish” (general education teacher reflection). Another participant shared that the simulated IEP meeting “felt like a reality. It felt like it was a real meeting which made it really fun” (school psychologist reflection). When participants experience a simulated IEP meeting, they can reduce fears of the unknown and feel more prepared in future IEP meetings.

Participants also shared feelings of assurance in their reflections. One participant shared: “I feel like everything is starting to all fall together and make more sense especially with being able to connect this mock IEP to a real work IEP meeting” (special education teacher reflection). One school psychologist participant agreed, explaining that “I feel prepared for when I start teaching” (reflection). Feelings of affirmation such as these support participants in developing the confidence they need to carry them through their first IEP meeting.

Participants all shared that they were both nervous and stressed prior to the IEP meeting. As one participant reflected, “My group and I were very nervous about the meeting, because we didn’t know what to expect,” (special education teacher reflection). Another participant similarly stated that they were “nervous at first; however, that feeling quickly subsided as I went along through the process” (general education teacher). Despite viewing a video model of an IEP meeting and learning about what takes place at IEP meetings, participants demonstrated that those models were not enough to fully understand what takes place at an IEP meeting. While nerves are natural in the beginning of the meeting, the participants began to feel more at ease and comfortable as the meetings progressed and after the meeting ended. Following the simulated IEP meeting, all participants expressed confidence and pride in their performance:

After the meeting was over, I think that we all felt proud of ourselves and also relieved that we made it through the whole meeting. I was pretty proud of my group since none of us had ever been to a real IEP meeting. (Special education co-teacher reflection)

The way this participant reflected on mutual feelings from the group also demonstrates the collaborative effort of the group. Following each IEP meeting, the participants debriefed with the instructor and their peers, sharing the relief they felt now that the meeting was over. Participants demonstrated these feelings of relief and pride in a similar way within their reflections. One parent participant shared, “I really enjoyed the mock IEP experience we simulated in class. I feel like I have a much deeper understanding of an IEP and what the IEP meeting process should look like after doing the activity” (reflection). This statement demonstrates a level of preparedness that the IEP simulation provided for this participant who had never attended a real IEP meeting before. Leaving the meeting with a sense of preparedness and understanding of what is expected during an IEP meeting was the purpose of this project and statements such as these affirm those efforts.

Overall findings suggest that when participants experience a simulated IEP meeting, they demonstrate a greater understanding of the IEP processes from IEP development to the IEP meeting. Seeing the whole process of the IEP document and the IEP meeting is important for PSTs to experience to understand what is expected of them. In addition, findings show that participants developed a great understanding of the various IEP team members roles and responsibilities. Finally, by participating in the IEP meeting, participants were able to reduce the fear of the unknown to feel more prepared and confident in both attending and leading future IEP meetings.

Discussion

Prior research in special education teacher preparation indicates that one area in which PSTs are often unprepared is IEP development and IEP meeting facilitation (Mueller et al., 2019). Simulated IEP meetings are one way that teacher preparation programs can enhance readiness in this area. Past research in this area supports the use of simulated IEP meetings to help prepare PSTs for not only understanding the IEP process, but also for collaborating with families (Dotger, 2011; Dotger & Smith, 2009; Holdren, 2017; Mueller et al., 2019). The findings from this study should be included in the growing body of research in the field of teacher preparation.

The purpose of this study was to better understand the role that a simulated IEP meeting has on PSTs. The research question guiding this study was: How do pre-service teachers describe their experiences following a simulated IEP meeting in an undergraduate teacher preparation program? Findings indicate that PSTs developed content knowledge of IEPs and IEP team members, an understanding of the importance of collaboration and preparation, and resulted in an enhanced sense of confidence in taking on the role of an IEP team member in their future. By participating in a simulated IEP meeting, the PSTs explained that they were able to learn how the IEP team members function collaboratively and began to understand the various roles involved. This involves learning to make professional judgements and navigating complex situations (Dotger & Smith, 2009). When PSTs are given the chance to take on a role and reflect on it, they can better understand how to problem solve alongside others. Understanding the role of the parent was one area that was especially enhanced through this project. Understanding the importance of collaborating with families is an area within special education in which many problems currently exist (Mueller & Vick, 2019). Parents have historically felt like passive participants and are not always meaningfully participating in the

IEP process (Mueller et al., 2019). This study allowed participants to be proactive in understanding how to incorporate families into the IEP meeting procedures by requiring one member to take on the role of the parent.

In addition, PSTs in this study noted the impact that the unexpected occurrence cards had on the experience. These unplanned events resulted in PSTs understanding the importance of preparation because “in a real meeting if a parent questions you on this, you have to be prepared” (Parent reflection). Placing PSTs in a situation where they can experience being presented with a problem to solve or surprised by a unique experience enhances the reflective process, resulting in greater learning (Dewey, 1933). While PSTs in this study were able to prepare for many parts of the IEP meeting, allowing various components to be left unknown had a positive impact on their learning. In addition, the reflective element allowed PSTs to evaluate themselves and their actions to consider the changes they would need to make in the future (Karatepe & Yilmaz, 2018). Being able to sit with a problem or experience and consider one’s strengths and weaknesses allowed PSTs to further develop their understanding of the experience. Harvey et al. (2016) shared numerous benefits of the use of reflective practice in teacher education. They explain that reflective practice not only helps PSTs make the connection between theory and practice, but also helps them make sense of their experience (Harvey et al., 2016).

IDEA outlines the procedures that special education teachers must follow to remain in compliance with a student’s IEP document and implementation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, §1415 *et seq.*, 2004). Part of this process involves the facilitation of an IEP meeting with identified parent participants. However, teachers continue to make procedural errors throughout the IEP process. One study revealed the most common errors involve parent participation, IEP components, IEP development, and the IEP team (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017). Many PSTs in this study described an enhanced understanding of the set up and technical procedures of an IEP meeting. Their thoughts reflected confidence in understanding the flow of the meeting, involvement of various stakeholders, and even the planning and preparation necessary. One participant reflected that they did not complete an excusal form when they had to leave the meeting early to pick up their students from specials. This is an example of a procedural error that teachers may make in an IEP meeting. Understanding the procedural components of the IEP meeting and development all contribute to a legally compliant process. These findings aligned with what Mueller et al. (2019) found following their simulated IEP meeting. The simulation serves as a type of “how to” activity to get a grasp on the flow of the meetings and what to expect.

Finally, this experience resulted in various emotional responses from PSTs. Finch et al. (2014) explained that an “experiential learning activity may trigger an emotional response (positive or negative) to this experience” (p. 26). Emotional responses were elicited from the reflection activity, where nervous emotions were reflected from the start of the simulation, followed by feelings of enjoyment, excitement, and confidence towards the end. Karatepe and Yilmaz (2018) explained that reflective activities can assist PSTs in discovering their underlying beliefs about an experience, can promote positive attitudes, and can enhance professional dispositions. By reflecting on their emotional responses to the activity, PSTs in this study were able to mindfully experience success and pride in their accomplishments.

Mueller et al. (2019) acknowledge the gap between what students learn in their teacher preparation program and what they do as teachers in the field. Including experiential learning opportunities can support PSTs in not only bridging that gap but also having a positive memory of the experience to draw upon in future situations. This study took place during PSTs first-year in the education program, therefore a major benefit to early exposure of this experience that they will be able to draw from this experience as they participate in field experiences more frequently. The special education teacher preparation program at the university involved in this

study requires that PSTs to observe at least one IEP meeting, therefore they can begin to make connections between their experience in the simulated IEP and one they observe in the field. Ensuring that PSTs have an opportunity to observe an IEP meeting or even participate in one in the semesters following the simulated experience can help affirm their experience.

Limitations

The current study adds to the growing body of research on the use of simulated IEP meetings in teacher preparation; however, there are a few key limitations to the study that must be addressed. First, while the data analyzed in this study was sufficient for the analysis, Rubin and Rubin (2012) warn that documents must be treated as interpretations of the truth. Because the reflections were submitted to the course instructor and sole researcher of this study, a fault of documentary analysis tells warns that “the authors might record things that make them look good, exaggerate their own importance, or leave out embarrassing details” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 27). Understanding this, the reflections shared within this study are one interpretation of the experience. Future studies should incorporate additional data sets to support triangulation (Yin, 2018). Secondly, the study utilized the participants as all members of the IEP team even though they have only just begun training as special education teachers. As a result, the interactions, and roles that the PSTs took on may not be complete representations of their future reality. Future studies should seek to incorporate more thorough descriptors and models of those roles. Third, the study utilized archival data and was therefore unable to determine long term effects or implementation of this practice in the field. Future studies should consider incorporating data before, during, and after the simulation to determine more clearly identifiable changes over time. The limitations reviewed should be helpful for future researchers who seek to pursue a similar study in the future.

Implications for Future Research

Future research is necessary in the field of special education teacher preparation to determine best practices for preparing pre-service teachers for the IEP meeting. Future researchers should consider developing a longitudinal study to follow up with participants as they enter their first year of teaching or even into their student teaching experience to determine long term effects of the simulated IEP experience. Follow up surveys may be conducted to determine the usefulness of the activity and determine which tools were most effective in preparing PSTs for their role in the IEP meeting. In addition, future research should consider expanding on the data collected within this study to include more data sets. This might include video recordings of the IEP meetings, anecdotal notes by the researcher, and focus group or individual interviews. Having additional data sets to triangulate during the analysis phase can enhance the trustworthiness of the study (Carter et al., 2014). Due to the collaborative nature of the IEP process, future researchers should consider developing a cross-departmental simulated IEP experience to involve other stakeholders who will likely participate in an IEP meeting in the future. These stakeholders might include students majoring in school administration, school psychology, general education, school counseling, and more. Engaging in a cross-departmental collaboration would support PSTs in working with diverse peers in other related fields who will be required to work collaboratively together in their future. Providing pre-service education professionals across the college of education with this type of experience would place the ownership of each IEP team member role and would allow the instructor to take on a facilitator role, which is characteristic of experiential learning. As I reflected on the learning outcomes of the PSTs, one student reflection caught me off guard. They mentioned that if given the opportunity to engage in future simulated IEP meetings they

would want there to be more meeting participants because that is more like real life. As a former special education teacher, most of my experiences only had a range of three to six participants at the meeting on average. It would be of interest for future instruction on IEP teams to acknowledge the other team member roles that are at some IEP meetings and how that might impact the flow of the meeting.

Conclusion

PSTs have identified leading and participating in IEP meetings as the aspect of their future roles as special education teachers they feel least prepared to do. The implications of not being prepared for the procedural components involved in the education of children with disabilities can greatly impact one's success as a special education teacher. PSTs have the right to be adequately prepared for their involvement in the IEP process and to have the opportunity to make mistakes in a low-stakes environment. Continuing the practice of simulated IEP meetings in teacher education can enhance the level of understanding and confidence that PSTs have in this area of the profession. Research should continue in the field to prompt more teacher educators to facilitate learning experiences such as this to prepare PSTs to meet the needs of their students and to learn to work collaboratively with other professionals.

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Acknowledgements: I would like to acknowledge Dr. Peggy Shannon-Baker, who has provided me with guidance and support in becoming a qualitative researcher. In addition, this study would not have been possible without the ongoing support of my writing group, who have believed in my abilities and helped me to see the bigger picture.

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Article Citation

Toledo, C. A. (2023). Role play: Actualizing the IEP meeting for pre-service teachers. *The Qualitative Report*, 28(1), 92-109. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2023.5635>
