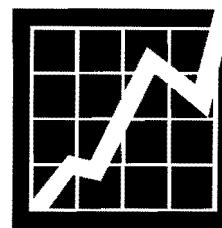


CHAPTER 1

Introduction



Do you remember when you were a child and your Aunt Mary would come up to you with questions like, “So, how are you doing in school?” and, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Chances are, if you are like many of us, you would have answered, “Fine,” or “I’m not sure.” Your answers were probably truthful. Things were okay, and we really did not know what we wanted to be when we grew up. We believed that the adults in our lives would work it out for us. Although, in some ways, this scene is typical for all children and youth, it is exacerbated for students with disabilities who are used to having others speak, make decisions, and choose their futures for them. They may not voice their dreams and goals, and worse, believe themselves incapable of acquiring the skills needed to achieve them. How many of your students would you describe as lacking self-awareness about their learning needs and related compensatory strategies? How many of your students do not understand their responsibilities in the classroom or in the community? The specter of learned helplessness looms large in the lives of students with disabilities, and it frustrates their families and teachers who are perplexed about how to reverse the trend.

Happily, we are beginning to recognize that students of all ages and abilities are capable of setting goals, making choices and decisions, and acting on their own behalf, and, as a result, our roles as educators, family members, friends, and other support persons may be fundamentally altered in the process. Instead of taking the lead in running a parent–teacher conference (an Individualized Education Program [IEP] or an Individual Transition Plan [ITP] meeting), we are learning to sit back and watch as students assume those roles themselves. We are learning to facilitate rather than to direct important decisions and interactions that allow students to manage the quality of their work, the goals they cherish (both short-term and long-term), and the futures they envision for themselves.

Parent–teacher–student conferences and student educational planning meetings are important vehicles for teaching students, both typical and those with disabilities, to assume more control over their immediate and future lives. Three meeting strategies that involve students in learning and practicing leadership skills, assertive communication, and self-advocacy skills are student-led conferencing, student-focused planning, and student-directed meetings. Each of these strategies places students at the center of the planning discussion by expanding their roles from passive to active participants.

DEFINING TERMS

Over the past few years, many professionals have addressed the methodologies and activities used as components of student-focused conferencing and planning. Unfortunately, many terms have been used to describe these activities which can lead to confusion. For our purposes, we will use the terms *student-led conferencing*, *student-centered planning*, and *student-directed meetings* to describe the three major means by which to involve and empower students, from the elementary to postsecondary school levels. Each of these terms will be defined and described further in subsequent chapters.

Because student-focused planning is directly linked to teaching, student advising, goal setting, student accommodations, program improvement, creating relationships, and IEP development, it can be implemented in a variety of ways over the life span of the student. In the elementary grades, student-focused planning can relate directly to parent-teacher conferences and can result in student-led conferences and portfolio development.

Student-led conferencing refers to the implementation of parent-teacher-student conferences, during which the student shares his or her work. During these meetings, rather than having the teacher tell parents about students' progress in school, students demonstrate their skills and show their work accumulated during the school year. Parents see how their children are progressing firsthand.

Student-centered planning is used to help students identify the futures they desire. Using this form of planning, students establish their goals by describing the type of job they hope to have, preferred living situations, and favorite recreation activities. Student-centered planning can also be used in classrooms or the community to guide the social interactions of all students. It can be used as a precursor to course or job placement advisement as well as to plan for an IEP or ITP meeting. Student-centered planning can occur concomitantly with an IEP/ITP meeting by transferring the goals that have been identified during the student-focused meeting directly onto the required administrative forms. Student-centered planning can also be used throughout the school year whenever the student, family, or professional sees a need. Those attending the meeting consider how to best support the student in reaching these goals.

Although the skills students learn to facilitate student-directed meetings can be used in multiple settings for a variety of purposes, their primary use is during individualized education and transition planning meetings. Students conduct the meetings themselves and learn how to convene meetings and how to facilitate agreement with other participants regarding goals and objectives.

WHY USE STUDENT-FOCUSED CONFERENCING AND PLANNING?

There are several reasons for using student-focused conferencing and planning. First, student involvement is mandated as part of the IEP process. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA) states that all students must be invited to attend their IEP meetings, or at the very least, to provide input into the planning process. However, simply appearing at a meeting and sitting passively while others make decisions is not what the crafters of IDEA had in mind. If students are to be involved, they must participate in the planning process. We

believe this participation is best achieved by providing guidance and structure through the activities of student-focused conferencing and planning.

Not only are students mandated to become involved in IEP planning, but we also believe that students have a fundamental right to assert their preferences, choices, and, ultimately, their goals and dreams. If students are to become proactive and productive citizens, the opportunity to make choices and decisions must start early and be exercised often in all facets of their lives.

As professionals, we need to reassess our needs as educators. It is easy to continue to act as caretakers of students, thus making their choices and decisions for them. We have seen how this approach has helped to foster learned helplessness and school-based disability. It is time for us to learn to step back and facilitate students' choices and decisions and to provide the support needed for successful outcomes.

This book provides readers with clear and specific guidelines about the purposes of student-focused strategies, when they are most effective, and how to implement them. It shows educators how to prepare students to take responsibility for their lives through the use of planning sessions that emphasize the central role of the students in designing long- and short-term goals.

We believe that students have the right to take charge of their lives. By doing so, they have the right to become more than bystanders in meetings during which their education is discussed. The basis for the use of the planning strategies described in this book is that students are entitled to participate in all aspects of the planning process. As shown in Table 1.1, we believe effective planning includes the student as a major stakeholder in all meetings during which the student's educational progress, curricula, and learning opportunities are discussed.

TABLE 1.1
Students' Bill of Rights

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- Students are entitled to participate in all aspects of the planning process.
 - Students are entitled to have parents, friends, advocates, and concerned educators involved in all decisions that affect their lives.
 - Students are entitled to be involved in all decisions that affect their lives.
 - Students are entitled to integrated, heterogeneous settings responsive to different learning styles.
 - Students are entitled to equal educational opportunities.
 - Students are entitled to planning for quality life experiences in all facets of their lives, including vocational, educational, social, emotional, recreational, and residential areas.
 - Students and families are entitled to be supported in giving direction to planning across the students' life spans.
-

RESEARCH

Student-focused conferencing and planning is central to all other phases of the educational process. It is intricately linked to assessment, curriculum, pedagogy, social foundations, and, most important, positive student outcomes. All educators are expected to plan and conduct collaborative conferences with individuals with exceptional learning needs and their families (Council for Exceptional Children, 1998). But actually engaging students in educational conferences and planning is a more recent practice implemented as a response to studies documenting the poor outcomes of students completing high school (Wagner, 1989; Wagner et al., 1991; Wehman, 1996).

In our research, we have seen the effects of poor or nonexistent planning as students prepare for their futures. Transition goals are poorly articulated or nonexistent (Federal Resource Center for Special Education, 1999); minimal collaboration occurs between home and school (Lehmann, Bassett, & Sands, 1999); and barriers to postsecondary education and training frequently exist (Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000). All of these factors give evidence of the exclusion of students in the planning process. Unfortunately, however, many of the skills we impart to students are just that—skills presented by the educator to a student who passively attempts to learn them. Little overt ownership occurs as students relinquish their abilities to make choices and decisions, to advocate for themselves, or to plan for their immediate and long-term futures. As teachers, we have traditionally believed that it is our role to decide what is “best” for students, without taking into account their dreams and goals and the network of supports surrounding them. Given this model, we develop a pattern of working with students from a deficit-driven perspective, without regard for their innate capacities and strengths. Thus, the unfolding scenario reflects students who may see only their weaknesses and the seemingly insurmountable means by which to ameliorate them. In contrast, student-focused conferencing and planning places the student at the center of all planning-related activities. The student has integral roles in preparing for meetings, reporting progress, leading meetings, and implementing the resulting actions items.

Although few would theoretically disagree about the merits of student involvement, there are still many educators and families who see no direct and lasting benefit to increasing students’ involvement, other than the students’ “feeling good” for the moment. What happens when students become active participants in meetings? When students are involved in the planning process, the outcomes are dramatic. Evidence from research shows that fostering student involvement through the planning process has both immediate and long-term benefits. Table 1.2 offers an empirically based rationale for involving students in planning across their life spans.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

Clearly, the essence of student-focused conferencing and planning is student involvement in some aspect of the meeting process. There are, however, three essential ingredients that define the core of all student-focused conferencing and planning strategies: listening, collaboration, and change. Student-focused conferencing and planning involves an ongoing process of listening, reflecting, and act-

TABLE 1.2
Why Involve Students?

Involving Students and Planning Across Their Life Spans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Increases knowledge and ownership of the services offered.</i> According to Smith, Edelen-Smith, and Stodden (1995), excluding key participants in planning processes may increase resistance to ideas and decrease cooperation. • <i>Enhances students' future success.</i> Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg (1997) found that successful adults with learning disabilities sought and exerted control over their lives by making decisions about events. Further, Ward (1988) suggests that people who take control of their lives and who can identify future goals have greater success in the future. • <i>Fosters high self-esteem.</i> Students whose opinions are valued, listened to, and acted upon become equal partners in the service delivery, thus increasing their sense of accomplishment and dignity (Lovett, 1996). • <i>Provides students with opportunities to practice self-determination.</i> According to a study by Lehmann, Bassett, and Sands (1999), students lack opportunities to engage in activities that facilitate the development of self-determination skills, such as articulating ideas, expressing needs, and acquiring leadership skills. • <i>Increases student-initiated goal setting.</i> Van Reusen, Bos, Schumaker, and Deshler (1994) reported that student-initiated goals increase from 14% to 86% when students are expected to plan for and participate in their IEPs. • <i>Encourages responsibility and decision-making skills.</i> Wehmeyer (1993) found that students who did not have opportunities to practice making choices tended to avoid making decisions and accepting responsibility. • <i>Addresses students' self-reported needs in order to attain desired futures.</i> These needs include self-responsibility, interdependence, ability to set realistic goals, self-acceptance, positive self-esteem, knowledge of disability, communication skills, and the ability to self-advocate. Preparing for and conducting educational planning meetings provides students with a means for learning all of these important skills (Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000).

ing. Student-focused conferencing and planning includes a committed team of family members, friends, educators, and community providers who are willing to collaborate. Student-focused conferencing and planning also requires that all participants be willing to accept the change in roles, skills, and attitudes that occurs as a result of using the strategy. Good planning takes into account the student's desired outcome (change) and what everyone must accomplish in order to support the student. The three essential ingredients to student-focused conferencing and planning—listening, collaboration, and change—are discussed here.

Listening

Listening involves attending meetings without bringing preconceived ideas to the table or providing preconceived answers. Listening changes the focus of educational planning from “What is wrong with you?” to “What has your life taught you and what can we learn from you?” (Lovett, 1996, p. 7). Listening alters the nature of the relationship between educators and students. When students are listened

to, they feel they have something worth saying. Equality is established. On the other hand, educators who listen become collaborators.

Collaboration

Collaboration is based on the premise that individuals need to support each other to define and to achieve goals (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 1994). Meeting participants work together to help the student. The support empowers the student to be in charge—addressing goals and learning how to achieve these goals independently, asking for help as needed. Collaboration creates a change in the roles of participants as collaborators anticipate change(s) in the life of the student.

Change

The outcome of planning is change—change for the student and his or her related community, including networks of friends and environments. The planning meeting signifies the end of the old and signals the beginning of the new. Change is the goal, but change is difficult to affect because people have to let go of the present, thereby leaving their comfort zone (Bridges, 1991).

BENEFITS

Why should you learn more about student-focused conferencing and planning? Parents, educators, and students agree that the use of student-focused conferencing and planning strategies is worthwhile. A student participating in a transition meeting commented, “I used to feel like I was in someone else’s dream; now I’m in control and living in my own dream.” The mother of another student said that the student-directed meeting was

the most fun, uplifting, and helpful experience in a special education staffing. For the first time it felt that there was a whole group focusing on positive solutions. It enabled the participants, including my family, to brainstorm new possibilities for our son that we never thought of, and they all came to fruition. For the first time I left an IEP [meeting] with a smile on my face instead of a general cloud of depression.

An elementary educator who incorporates student-led conferences into the spring parent–teacher conferences reports, “I don’t need to tell parents about how well or poorly their children are doing. They can see for themselves how much their children have learned and what support is needed from home.” Another educator confessed that, although she was skeptical at first, she started using student-focused conferencing and planning because of its benefits for her students, and that she was relieved to be able to share the workload with others. There are a myriad of other reasons to use student-focused conferencing and planning. Table 1.3 summarizes these reasons.

The essence of student-focused conferencing and planning strategies is to listen to an individual student, to assist the student in developing a workable plan to achieve goals, and to work together to implement the desired course of action. Later chapters in this book provide a blueprint for conducting these meetings.

Chapter 2 provides a more in-depth description of the planning strategies and the similarities and differences between them. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, you will learn what tasks must be completed before, during, and after the meeting is over. Common problems and ways to avoid or correct them are also discussed at the end of each of the chapters. The skills necessary for conducting and participating in meetings are described in Chapter 5, along with suggested learning activities. Finally, a list of helpful resources is found in the Appendix.

As the French say, “bon courage,” as you use this book!

TABLE 1.3

Why Use Student-Focused Conferencing and Planning?

For students:

- Assists them in thinking about their futures
- Increases sense of belonging
- Increases sense of ownership
- Provides enhanced opportunities for school and work
- Expands support network
- Increases responsibility
- Enhances self-determination
- Addresses quality-of-life issues

For educators:

- Increases collaboration with families and other professionals
- Decreases workload of implementing plans without assistance
- Increases knowledge of students' capacities
- Provides an authentic activity for promoting self-determination

For families:

- Provides a network of supports
 - Views the student and family in a positive light
 - Provides better collaboration with schools and agencies
 - Increases shared responsibility
 - Plans for the future
-