Scaffolding the Joint Venture for Developing and Implementing a Meaningful Individualized Education Program

Ji-Mei Chang, Ph.D.

Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for learners with disabilities, including preschool-aged children, is one of the major provisions of Public Law 105-17: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Hence, an IEP is a truly individualized document, developed for each specific student with special needs. The development of each learner’s IEP must take place within the context of the special education process, once he or she has been identified as having a disability and qualified for special education and/or related services.

By law, the IEP allows schools and families to create an instructional environment where teachers, parent/guardians, school administrators, psychologists, advocates, related services personnel, and students (when encouraged to participate) work together to provide multiple opportunities for the student with special needs in order to achieve their IEP goals and objectives. Therefore, the provision of a meaningful IEP is the cornerstone of a quality school education for a student with special needs.

A Need for The Scaffold

The importance of completing an IEP document for a student with special needs is not just fulfilling the administrative requirements for schools, but also establishing a blue print to guide the school intervention and assessment predicated within the district’s general core curriculum. Therefore, all members participating in an IEP meeting must come together to clarify and brainstorm ways to generate meaningful educational goals and objectives. All interventions must be supported by best practices that address the learner’s unique needs within his or her present levels of educational performance.

However, we are experiencing an extreme shortage of qualified special education teachers in many regions, particularly in Northern California. Many public school students who were qualified for special education services may face the challenge of having been placed in special education, but without receiving the quality support and services. The situation is further complicated when the students and families come from a diverse background that is characterized as non-proficient in school language and with less social and financial means to monitor a child’s day-to-day school experiences and progress. Without a strong commitment from school personnel, such students’ typical school day can be filled with missed learning opportunities (Chang, 1995), such as chances to improve language and literacy skills.

The purpose of this article is to describe how an IEP team may be scaffolded using six strategies while developing and implementing an IEP in a school (see diagram). The six strategies illustrated in Figure 1 were based on six pedagogical guidelines for classroom and home practices (Chang, 2001a). The Scaffold for Individualized Education Program was designed by integrating two sets of pedagogical tools, each guided by a major theoretical framework. The first is a set of Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy proposed by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, & Excellence (CREDE, 2002). CREDE was funded by the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvements (OERI) and informed by sociocultural theory of education (Tharp, 1997) as the organizing conceptual structure to guide its research projects. The second set of pedagogical tools is using Multiple Intelligences (MI) approaches to understanding (Gardner, 1999a), and these are powerful points of entry to grab attention, offering meaningful analogies or metaphors to tie new with old knowledge, and generating multiple representations of core concepts.

The six strategies reflected in the scaffold were field tested in a 3-year study conducted within a Title I middle school that focused on teacher learning and collaboration to assist Asian American English learners with and without special needs (Chang, 2001a; Chang, 2002a). To assist the IEP team members in maximizing the joint effort in hosting a culturally responsive and productive IEP meeting, Figure 1 represents a metaphor of a scaffolding process. This scaffold symbolizes six strategies that would assist team members’ effort to pool knowledge about the student, the school curriculum, as well as the resources available within and beyond school to deliver services that will strengthen the direct connection with special education placement.

Theoretical Frameworks for The Scaffold

Of the two theoretical frameworks that guided the previous studies, each provided us with viable pedagogical tools to generate the six strategies used in this article. The first framework is the Sociocultural Theory of Education (Tharp, 1997), reflecting the roots of Vygotsky’s (1978, 1981) theory of learning and cognitive development. The gist of this theory informs us that individual learners are neither to be viewed as a receptacle, waiting for knowledge to be transmitted by teachers, nor an acquirer, obtaining information solely through an individual effort (Tharp, 1997). Instead, all individual learners are influenced profoundly by cultural and social factors in their environment. Hence, learning occurs when individual learners are supported and actively participate in teaching and learning activities. The same framework is applicable for each school’s IEP teams and meetings because constructing an IEP is a joint learning and productive process.

To fully align the special education placement with the delivery of quality services, all participating members in an IEP meeting must actively engage in sociocultural activities.
It is particularly important for inexperienced special education teachers or new education specialists to engage in joint productive activities for developing and implementing an appropriate IEP for each student. If the Sociocultural Theory of Education is valued and practiced in a school, then it will generate strong support for all participants in an IEP meeting to focus on what is best for the student with special needs.

The second framework is Howard Gardner’s (1983; 1999a; 1999b) Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Although MI was never intended to shape curriculum, instruction, or assessment in the field of school education, it has inspired many teachers, parents, and educators both within and beyond the United States (Chang, 1999a; 1999b; 2000a). Kornhaber (1999) and her associates (Kornhaber, Fierros, & Venema, 1998) at Harvard University’s Project Zero systematically examined how MI worked as a reform movement in schools over the years. They studied 41 schools in the US using the theory of MI and generated six compass points as a guide for educators, parents, researchers, and schools to plan and evaluate their attempts to build an MI school (Chang, 2000b).

The six compass points generated from the 41 schools highlighted first that each school shared a culture of valuing each student. They believed that everyone can learn and succeed, and that hard work by teachers is necessary to support diverse learners. The second compass point showed that each school reflected on various stages of readiness for awareness-building in order to implement the theory of MI as the basis for school reform. Each school did not impose an administrative mandate for such reform among the staff. The third point revealed that each school used MI as a tool for teaching and learning activities to assist student performance and produce high quality work. They did not promote MI for the sake of MI.

The fourth compass point stated that each school emphasized staff collaboration in order to share ideas and exchange suggestions. They generated an environment for everyone to contribute and receive support through joint productive activities. The fifth point presented was that each school provided options for students to make choices on projects and assignments. By doing so, the school demonstrated that they value students’ choices when engaging in learning and assessment activities. The sixth point demonstrated that each school enriched a variety of art curriculum to broaden student learning and understanding within and across disciplines. The Project’s findings also confirmed the fact that groups of students with learning disabilities and those placed at risk of school failure made the most significant gain in their test scores (Kornhaber, Fierros, & Venema, 1998).

Our previous studies (Chang, 2000b; 2001a; 2001b; 2002a) as well as The Project’s findings further support the value in using the theory of MI as tools (Garden, 1999a; Kornhaber, 1999) to assist teachers, students, and their family members to tap fully into everyone’s multiple abilities and multiple pathways in teaching, learning, and assessing student outcome. In addition, I have always believed strongly that MI serves multiple functions in enhancing school education and the lives of Asian American individuals (Chang, 1999b). From the perspective of addressing Asian Pacific American students with special needs, the theory of MI will guide the team to explore these students’ multiple abilities within perceived or diagnosed disabilities. This is a positive direction moving away from the traditional within-child deficit syndrome, which sends signals blaming an individual student’s inability to perform school tasks. To reduce any challenges that might be faced by families that have a child with disabilities in Asian American communities, an MI-oriented IEP team would be a strong support. Together, the team would send a strong message to those who come into contact with the learner and family that every child has multiple abilities, including those with disabilities. Mostly, every student with disabilities deserves to obtain responsive special and/or general education intervention characterized in cultivating their multiple abilities and addressing individual differences all through his or her formal schooling.

Six Strategies for The Scaffold

The major purpose of this scaffold presented in Figure 1 was to guide the school’s IEP team to support teacher, students, and parents/guardians to align special education placement with quality services. When implemented properly, this scaffolding process will also generate a workable model for school personnel to forge a multi-level collaboration within and beyond school to build a strong safety net for Asian Pacific American students in needs of school support (Chang, in press). The six strategies for IEP team are as follows:

**Strategy 1: Joint productive activities—All participants produce IEP together.**

CREDE Standard 1: Joint Productive Activity (JPA) highlights the need for team members to interact and work jointly to produce a meaningful IEP. JPA is characterized by pro-
The six strategies reflected in the scaffold were field tested in a 3-year study conducted within a Title I middle school that focused on teacher learning and collaboration to assist Asian American English learners with and without special needs.
tional classroom is like a cemetery roll. The puzzled facial expression among the audience signaled that they were unable to make meaning from such a metaphor. In reality, they have not seen a western cemetery roll, and their cemetery is nothing like the ones customarily displayed in the States. Strategy 3 reminds us to verify as well as refine the metaphors or analogies used in teaching and communication. In today’s school, diversity exists among IEP team members in their culture, language, religious and ethnic background, hence the gaps in understanding each other’s values, beliefs, attitude towards special education and/or school personnel, as well as prior experiences/knowledge about schooling often play an important role to trigger miscommunication. To truly scaffold the development of a meaningful IEP document that can be fully implemented, we must reach a shared understanding about the special education process. No matter how much we think we may know about the student based on standardized testing results and classroom behaviors, we are likely to paint a partial image of this student if we don’t actively solicit insights and synthesize information and observations shared by parents or guardians on the information they have about their child in regards to school and home life.

To fully implement Strategy 3, we must rely on the wisdom of school personnel to exercise empathy in listening and responding, an art that can be further enhanced by a habit of looking at an issue from multiple perspectives. We also need to help school personnel be familiar with knowledge of the local community and the skills that are important in the community. Such an effort will help teachers design meaningful instructional activities that are linked to what the student already knows from home and/or community as well as making a connection in applying their learning to a familiar environment. Hence, it requires the IEP team to be flexible and well versed in helping each other make and clarify meaning at the IEP meeting.

**Strategy 4: Modeling the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of assessment data, placement decision and intervention strategies.**

CREDE Standard 4: Teaching Complex Thinking through Challenging Activities (CA) reinforces the team’s commitment to collaboratively solve complex problems in addressing a student’s special needs. For example, special education assessment and placement processes are often difficult for laypersons to fully comprehend. In the case of identifying students with learning disabilities, there is no uniform formula across districts or states to yield the discrepancy scores needed to qualify a student for special education services. Furthermore, in the current standard-based school education, part of each student’s IEP process is to create appropriate annual goal and short-term benchmarks/objectives that are aligned with core content standards. When a middle school student reads three or four grades below his or her current grade level, the team will face the challenge of aligning his or her short-term objectives with appropriate district benchmarks in reading. Guided by the IDEA Amendment 1997, a special education teacher is also obligated to report periodically to parents/guardians how their child is progressing towards meeting his or her objectives and annual goals. If this child was placed in a responsive special education program and supported by most qualified special education teacher/specialist, we would observe expected progress.

The shortage of qualified special education teachers in many regions, however, casts further concerns about ineffective special education intervention. For example, it is common to place students with special needs in rote learning or engaging in drills tasks with much less emphasis on cultivating their higher order thinking skills (HOTS). This type of special education placement and services would not convince us that they have high expectations of students with special needs. Furthermore, many testing results administered by inexperienced special education teachers can be faulty. For example, many such new teachers, who only have an emergency teaching credential, are routinely asked to administer standardized tests after receiving a one-shot district-sponsored training. Many may not be ready to administer and interpret such tests. This is a realistic concern among schools or districts that have a high demand of referrals for special education assessment and/or annual/triennial IEP evaluation. Strategy 4 reminds the school personnel to engage in an enculturation approach, that is, modeling-explaining-interacting-feeding back to promote and develop HOTS in order for them to be well equipped in coping learning challenges and realizing learning potentials.

To implement Strategy 4, it requires the team to develop and enhance our productive habits of mind, or a set of intelligent behaviors (Costa & Kallick, 2000). This will not only help the team co-produce a meaningful IEP document, but also models for students when we invite one to participate, how adults behave in a decision making process by using a set of habits of mind, such as thinking interdependently, gathering data through all senses, listening with understanding and empathy, thinking flexibly, remaining open to continuously learning, or thinking and communicating with clarify and precision, etc. All of these habits of mind will form the basis for our students to develop viable self-determination skills, that is, the skills allow an individual to make choices and decision for themselves. Equipped with self-determination skills and a set of habits of mind, we are far more likely to guide students with special needs to monitor their own behaviors and engage in active learning. It is also critical for those to seek appropriate transition services at the secondary schools in order to secure support and pathways to enter a two-year or four-year postsecondary institution as well as to secure meaningful employment.

**Strategy 5: Engaging participants through dialogue and purposeful conversations in an IEP meeting**

CREDE Standard 5: Instructional Conversation (IC) guides the IEP team members to engage each other in respectful two-way or multi-way conversations; it is not that parents/guardians must listen to the experts in the meeting. Strategy 5 reminds us that to solve problems and make complex decisions, every member must be invited and actively engaged in sharing their perspectives, raise questions and concerns, and seek clarity about language, issues, assessment data, placement and services.

In essence, the art of IC is to help IEP team members weave three major elements: Student and parent(s)/guardian(s)’ prior knowledge or experiences, current relevant examples for clarification, as well as specific special education process and knowledge. Hence, IC is critical in an IEP meeting. Strategy 1 provides the foundation for Strategy 5, and we must rely on Strategy 5 to actually deliver the contents of all other strategies in a non-threatening atmosphere.
Implementing an IC in a classroom is often challenging because we have a large number of students. Conversing with a large group, we are likely to lose some students’ attention and cannot effectively weave each student’s prior knowledge/experiences and meaningful examples/metaphors with a targeted concept to be taught in a lesson. The size of an IEP meeting provides an optimal context for generating meaningful IC as a means to solve problems, reach the shared understanding, and produce a responsive IEP document.

To implement strategy 5, we must believe that everyone has something important to contribute; hence we must show respect and interest in inviting the student and his or her parent(s)/guardian(s) into this decision making and problem solving process. For example, when an interpreter is used, we must try to maintain the eye contact with the parents/guardians or any other speaker, without solely focusing on the interpreter. In addition, we must exercise the habits of mind, such as listening with understanding and empathy or thinking interdependently. Such an effort will help the team relate to these members’ knowledge, cultural experience, concerns, and aspirations, etc. to reach the goal of a shared understanding about the special education process.

Strategy 6: Using the theory of MI as tools to prevent students from the cycle of defeat through building a meaningful IEP.

MI as tools for learning enhances the IEP team members’ abilities to value the learning differences, the abilities with the diagnosed disabilities as well as explores multiple pathways conducive to his or her learning style. Strategy 6 reminds us that we must hold ourselves accountable and strongly believe that all students can learn. Hence, we must also explore various pathways, such as drawing, role-play, drama, films, pictures, and stories, etc., to reach them, meet their needs, and allow them to make choices about ways to reflect their learning of certain topics/concepts.

Through our modeling the use of MI in teaching, learning, assessing student learning as well as discussing with his or her parent(s)/guardian(s), we demonstrate to our students that they are valued in our classroom/school. This is critical for them to develop a healthy and productive sense of self-respect and confidence. Strategy 6 also provides a framework for teachers to prevent students from the cycle of defeat (Brophy & Good, 1974) that is initiated from teacher’s low expectation, reduced interaction with the student, and indifference. Students are sensitive, and they can pick up signs from teacher’s behaviors to know that they are not welcome in a classroom. Such a phenomenon will lead to further deterioration in student behaviors and school performance. Strategy 6 will help the IEP team members raise their expectations of students with special needs while providing assistance and support.

To implement strategy 6, we may study the implications of the six compass points for a school (Kornhabor, et al, 1998) and use MI approaches to understanding (Gardner, 1999b). Most of all, having diverse groups of members, we are more likely to brainstorm suitable entry points to a student’s attention in a given lesson, culturally appropriate metaphors for tying the new concepts with the old ones, and presenting core concepts across many contexts to enhance student learning. Such a JPA approach will gradually help teachers build instructional repertoires that are effective for scaffolding student learning.

A Closing Remark

An IEP meeting often serves the point of entry for many family members and community advocates to observe school practices as well as for schools to establish the working partnership within and beyond school. Since today’s school personnel encounter diverse groups of parents/guardians and students who are in need of school support, I believe that this proposed scaffold for IEP Development will highlight important strategies for strengthening any collaborative partnership that schools need to build both within and beyond school. It will also empower the teaching staff and related service providers in the effort to promote and build a responsive inclusion for all students and school personnel.

This article intends to broaden the application of the instructional scaffold in many inter-related contexts, so the set of pedagogical tools generated from CREDE standards and an MI approach to understanding may become second nature for school personnel. It is my hope that such a practice would be valued in schools because the school administrators and teachers control the power to prevent students from the cycle of defeat by infusing more effective strategies as well as high and responsive expectations.

Ji-Mei Chang, Ph.D. is a Professor in the College of Education, San Jose State University. For more information please email: jmchang@email.sjsu.edu.

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References


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