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# Teachers' Perceptions of the Efficacy of Standards-based IEP goals

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Teachers' Perceptions of the Efficacy of Standards-based IEP Goals

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Special Education

by

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## **Dedication**

To my grandfather, Remus Anthony Hebert, who I wish more than anything was here to see me graduate. Of everyone, he would have been the most proud of me. He lives on in my heart.

To my nephew Timmy, who embodies the spirit of this manuscript. My wish is for your continued success.

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.

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## **Abstract**

Although standards-based IEP goals have been mandated in many states for almost a decade, their effectiveness is unknown. Standards-based IEP goals were first created to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, which increased accountability for all students as well as those with disabilities, while providing targets for state standardized test scores and ensuring access to, and progress in, the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Factors, such as teacher training, collaboration, and accountability may influence teachers' perceptions of aligning IEP goals to grade level expectations. Using a survey, this study examined teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEP goals. One hundred prekindergarten and kindergarten female teachers responded to the survey. Calculations from a linear regression indicated that a relationship existed between the usage of standards-based goals and curriculum-based measures. Results also indicated that teachers may choose to ignore standards-based IEP goals at times to focus on individual students' needs. Overall, teachers reported that they wrote or gave input into the development of IEPs. However, not all teachers recognized the benefits of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, despite indicating that accommodations and modifications were generally defined. Future research suggestions include investigating perceptions regarding standards-based IEP goals in terms of type of disability of the student. Additionally, a review of personnel preparation programs could provide additional information about the training that teachers receive regarding standards-based IEP goals.

Keywords: standards-based goals, IEP, special education, early childhood, students with disabilities, Common Core State Standards

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

Federal legislation has transformed special education in public school systems including the enactment of mandates that determine the settings where students with disabilities receive services. In 1974, the estimates of children with disabilities being excluded from public school systems were around one million students (Karger & Hitchcock, 2010; 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (c)(2)(C)). It is estimated that millions of children are currently receiving special education services and being included in public education in the United States. According to the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics at Hunter College, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, 6,483,372 students, from ages 3-21, 12.8%, received special education services under IDEA in the fall of 2008 (Retrieved from <http://www.data-first.org>). For almost four decades, students with disabilities have benefitted from laws that guarantee them specific rights in public school systems.

#### **Education for all Handicapped Children Act**

The passage of Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975 mandated that all public schools receiving public funds must provide equal access to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) to children with physical and mental disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The legislation also required schools to design an individualized education plan (IEP) with multiple stakeholders who know and/or work with the child with disabilities (20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.). The IEP is “a written statement for each child with a disability” (20 U.S.C. § 614(d)(1)(A)(i)). According to Section 614 of the federal legislation, the IEP must be developed, implemented, and revised in accordance with the specified components.

## **Mainstreaming**

To adhere to EHA and the requirement of the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities, school systems began to *mainstream* their students with disabilities into general education classrooms. Although mainstreaming was not a provision of EHA, the practice of mainstreaming was implemented by school systems to adhere to the mandate of the LRE. Mainstreaming did not eliminate students with disabilities from being placed in a separate classroom but did allow them to be integrated with general education students, usually during nonacademic periods, such as lunch, physical education, and recess (Bowe, 2007). Eventually, as appropriate, some students with disabilities were mainstreamed for academic subjects. This response to the law, coupled with advocacy for inclusion of students with disabilities with their peers, caused a paradigm shift from viewing special education as a location of services to recognizing special education *as* the services (Wehmeyer, 2002). Despite the intentions of mainstreaming to align special education services more closely to the requirements of the federal laws, this practice did not broadly address the academic needs of students with disabilities because their IEPs did not necessarily reflect the curriculum of their general education peers (Bowe).

## **The Board of Education v. Rowley**

Due to the vague language utilized in EHA, implementation of its tenets was subject to wide interpretation until a case appeared before the United States Supreme Court. In 1982, in the decision of *Board of Education v. Rowley*, the U.S. Supreme Court interpreted FAPE as requiring equal access to public education thus affecting the services provided in the LRE by not guaranteeing what type of education or where the education was conducted. The decision only

specified that students with disabilities could not be denied access to an education. Therefore, although students were mainstreamed or included in general education classrooms in the years following the decision of *Board of Education v. Rowley*, schools not did not consistently provide adequate aids, accommodations, modifications, services, or supports because the major requirement was that students have equal access (Karger & Hitchcock, 2010). As a result, schools were still not required to tailor educational goals to grade level content and the least restrictive environment determination became discretionary based upon individual school districts.

Despite the deleterious nature of the Rowley decision and ambiguous language in the laws, positive changes were noted in schools including increases in graduation rates and post-school employment opportunities for students with disabilities (Karger & Hitchcock, 2010). In spite of these changes, because of the reports from the U.S. Department of Education in 1995 that showed students with disabilities tended to fail classes and dropout of school, Congress amended IDEA to clarify existing terminology and to clearly state the expectations of educating students with disabilities (Karger & Hitchcock).

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 1997**

In 1997, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed. One of the components was to provide safeguards against segregated, isolated classrooms for students with disabilities (Karger & Hitchcock, 2010; 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (c) (2)). This reauthorization and clarification of laws resulted in three important changes to the preexisting legislation: (1) students with disabilities had access to general education curriculum; (2) students with disabilities were to be involved with general education curriculum; and (3) students with

disabilities were to make progress in the general education curriculum (20 U.S. C § 1401 (3), 34 C.F. R. § 300.7).

Moreover, the amendments defined *general education curriculum* as the overall plan to implement instructional activities that are consistent with expectations, content, methods, and outcomes for general education students (Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose, & Jackson, 2002).

Additionally, the terms *involvement* and *progress* were clearly defined in the new legislation to assure fidelity in implementation. Involvement in general education curriculum necessitates that:

(a) IEP goals are specific and address how the student will be involved and progress in the general education curriculum, (b) that the IEP will specifically address the usage of supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, and supports, and (c) an explanation must be given as to why a student is not participating in the general education classroom (Karger & Hitchcock, 2010). Progress in the general education curriculum includes: (1) measurement of progress towards IEP goals will be measured including annual goals, benchmarks, and short-term objectives, (2) participation in district and state assessments, with proper modifications and accommodations, as appropriate, and (3) provision of performance indicators with progress reports on achievement towards the indicators (Karger & Hitchcock).

Despite the fact that the federal legislation clearly operationalized the terms access, involvement, and progress, the prescription of special education services only provided a framework for interpretation, not explicit directives. Therefore, its implementation became subject to vagaries of how the services will be rendered and where services will be provided, which caused inconsistencies among different school systems and in different states.

## **Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004**

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) 2004 is the most recent revision of special education law. To clarify eligibility requirements to receive special education services, Congress denoted that a child must have two qualifications: (1) at least one of the specified disabilities according to the law, and (2) the disability results in the child needing special education services and/or related services. The disability categories are: (a) mental retardation (now referred to as an intellectual disability), (b) hearing impairments, including deafness, (c) speech or language impairments, (d) visual impairments, including blindness, (e) emotional disturbance, (f) orthopedic impairments, (g) autism, (h) traumatic brain injury, (i) other health impairments, and (j) specific learning disabilities. Additionally, children aged three to nine, who are eligible for services, can be classified as developmentally delayed (20 U.S. C § 1401 (3), 34 C.F. R. §300.7).

One of the most significant mandates of IDEIA is that all students should “have access to the general education curriculum to have the opportunity to learn grade-level content based upon grade-level standards” (C.F.R. Part 34 300.26 [b] [3] [ii]; 300.347 [a] [1] [2]). The elaboration of the terminology, access to the general education curriculum, specified that students with disabilities should be learning the curriculum for their particular grade level along with their general education peers.

Other language is further clarified in IDEIA including several updates on recommendations on achieving mastery of goals (Wright &Wright, 2010). Additionally, on every IEP, the academic, developmental, and functional needs of the student is delineated thereby ensuring that student information is as individualized and specific as possible to provide a more concrete description of the student’s overall needs (Wright &Wright). To address high-

stakes assessment, which included a larger percentage of students with disabilities, IDEIA required that the IEP must also include a statement about necessary accommodations needed on state and district assessments to measure the academic and functional performance of the child. An IEP also includes: (a) a statement of the child's current levels of academic and functional performance, (b) how a child's disability affects the child's access and progress in the general education curriculum, and (c) for preschool children, how the child's participation in appropriate activities is affected (20 U.S. C § 614 (d)(1)(A)(i)(VI)).

### **No Child Left Behind Legislation**

Special education is not the only area of education transformed by federal legislation. In 2001, the entire public education system was revolutionized with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) with revisions to issues ranging from high-stakes testing to highly qualified teachers (20 U. S. C. §§ 6301 *et seq*). Although these laws addressed the entire public education system, special education was specifically addressed, which included directives such as IEP alignment with general education state-standards and norm-referenced diagnostic assessments, for both district and state, during the school year. In an effort to systematically assess all students, including ones with disabilities, NCLB mandated that every state annually test students in grades third through eighth and again in high school between tenth and twelfth grade. The assessments are to be the same for all students within each state and based upon the state's academic content standards. Two percent of the students with disabilities in each grade level do not have to be included in the grade level's scores, and up to one percent of students with disabilities can participate in alternative assessment (20 U. S. C. §§ 6301 *et seq*).



Since the passage of NCLB, accountability, which now has an emphasis on student and teacher performance, has become the cornerstone of the public school system. Prior to NCLB, there was not a restricted percentage of students with disabilities that were permitted to take alternative assessments and nor was there a designated percentage of students with disabilities included in the general education classroom scores. As a result of IDEIA and NCLB, many states started to change their approaches to addressing students with disabilities' achievement on their IEP goals.

NCLB and IDEIA both address assessment of students with disabilities. NCLB addresses the percentage of students with disabilities that can be eligible for alternative assessments (20 U. S. C. §§ 6301 *et seq*). IDEIA states that students with disabilities should participate in state assessment of their grade-level standards (C.F.R. Part 34 300. 347 [a] [3]). These tenets have resulted in states specifically addressing how school systems should align students with disabilities' IEP goals to their state standards for general education students.

Since NCLB, some testing requirements have been further redefined. To ensure the success of a larger percentage of students with disabilities on assessments, the United States Department of Education introduced new regulations in 2007 that stipulated states could modify achievement tests for students that are unlikely to master grade-level content at the same pace as their peers (Rabinowitz, Sato, Case, Benitez, & Jordan, 2008). Although the tests may be modified, states are still required to measure mastery of grade-level content but on a different level. Therefore, access to and progress in the general education curriculum is still imperative for students with disabilities (Roach, Chiungu, LaSalle, Talaptra, Vignieri, & Kurz, 2009).

### **The Relevance of Standards-based IEP Goals**

Because IDEA, NCLB, and IDEIA raised the expectations for students with disabilities' curriculum to be aligned with their general education peers, many states changed the way IEP goals are written and the content of those goals. The current trend is to align the students' goals with the grade-level expectations of all students thus creating *standards-based* IEP goals (Cortiella, 2006). A standards-based IEP is defined by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc. (NASDSE) as a document (and a process) that has annual goals aligned with state standards to help facilitate student achievement (Ahern, 2010).

### **Issues with implementing GLEs with students with disabilities**

Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela, and Baker, (2006, p. 202) defined general education curriculum as “explicit curriculum found in general education content standards.” According to this definition, standards-based IEP goals theoretically can address the mandates of providing access to general education curriculum incorporating general education content standards into the goals. However, all expectations in a required grade may not be appropriate for some students with disabilities. For example, an English language arts (ELA) GLE goal in pre-kindergarten in Louisiana is: to demonstrate understanding of phonemic awareness by manipulating and identifying individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words with three sounds (Retrieved from <http://www.doe.la.us>). If a student has developmental delays or a diagnosed disability and is unable to verbalize sounds or attend to a speaker, it may be more appropriate for the student to learn how to track words in a book with their eyes rather than produce phonemes. Students may need to learn precursory skills before they can progress to higher levels of learning.

Without experience with teaching techniques used in special education, general educators may not know how to facilitate optimal learning for children with disabilities. Pétursdóttir and Sigurdardóttir (2006) found that two staff members, one early childhood educator and one early childhood paraeducator, who were trained in behavioral teaching techniques, such as tracking the words on a page as the reader reads aloud, had an increase in correct implementation of techniques from 16-31% correct to 92-95% correct after they were trained to follow the procedures. Prior to the training, the staff delivered instruction without clarity, students exhibited off-task behavior during instruction, and consequences were not consistently used to reinforce correct responses. The results of the study indicated that general education teacher training of techniques, such as discrete trials to work with students with disabilities, is an integral component of providing access to the general education curriculum.

Standards-based IEP goals may discourage educators who have little or no training in providing more specialized instruction to students with disabilities. Additionally, educators with a lack of experience with implementing precursory skills or modifying content may not individualize the instruction for students with disabilities. Therefore, a misconception may exist among educators that teaching GLEs will solely provide students with disabilities adequate access to the general education curriculum.

### **Efficacy of Standards-Based IEP Goals**

Educators unable to provide appropriate instruction to students with disabilities may prove to be detrimental for long-term progress. Early childhood students with disabilities must develop social and functional skills along with academic skills to ensure that they reach their potential (Council for Chief State School Officers and Early Childhood Education Assessment

Consortium, 2007). While access to the general education curriculum is important, students with disabilities' individual progress is equally, if not more, important. Without background in special education, general educators may not understand how to meet the needs of their students with disabilities. Although IEP goals may address social or functional skills, the frequency in which students with disabilities actually receive instruction centered on their individual goals may be overshadowed by instruction centered on the general education curriculum.

Additionally, because reports cards and special education progress reports are focused on students with disabilities' progress on the GLEs, standards-based IEPs goals may be convenient to write because teachers are provided a focus for instruction. However, GLEs may not be appropriate for certain students with disabilities because of their academic or functional level, especially students with significant disabilities in early childhood education where development varies among students. Thus, standards-based IEP goals may not adequately address the skills that are needed to make progress in the general education curriculum.

For the last four decades, special education advocates have persuaded lawmakers and policy makers to recognize students with disabilities' individualized educational needs. With the relatively recent introduction of standards-based IEP goals, the fundamental principle of special education, which calls for individualization, may sometimes be compromised because a student may need to learn skills or concepts that are not included in standards-based IEP goals for their appropriate grade level. Thus, a concern exists about the students' needs being met.

### **Placement of students**

The placement of students with disabilities has the potential to impact the implementation of IEP goals and objectives. When students are in inclusive settings with their general education

peers, they may be more likely to access the general education curriculum as compared to students with disabilities in segregated or self-contained settings. The law mandates that the student should be initially placed into the general education setting unless justification can be made. According to IDEA, “before a disabled child can be placed outside of the regular educational environment, the full range of supplementary aids and services that, if provided, would facilitate the student’s placement in the regular classroom setting, must be considered” (34 C.F.R. Appendix A). Thus, general educators are expected to implement IEP goals when students with disabilities are in inclusive settings. Also, special educators with students in self-contained or resource settings implement IEP goals. Therefore, the placement of students with disabilities has the potential to influence the way in which IEP goals are included within the curriculum.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Turnbull, Turnbull, Wehmeyer, and Park (2003) emphasized that the goal of education is to enhance the quality of life of students with disabilities with an emphasis on academic achievement. They purport that academic goals are a means for achieving all other goals and as a method for guiding curriculum and assessment.

Turnbull et al. (2003) cross-referenced IDEA guiding principles with Schalock's (1996) eight quality of life domains: (1) emotional well-being, (2) interpersonal relations, (3) material well-being, (4) personal development, (5) physical well-being, (6) self-determination, (7) social inclusion, and (8) rights. The domains address issues that students with disabilities face being in early childhood education to high school and beyond. For the purposes of their study, four quality of life domains are used for a framework that incorporates quality of life and educational

outcomes for early childhood students with disabilities. All four quality of life domains have an impact on the early childhood student. Personal development involves education and daily living skills. Early childhood education students with disabilities develop through education as well as functional living skills. Students' rights include due process and barrier-free environments. Young students with disabilities should have access to the general education setting upon entry to school. Interpersonal relationships focus on the friendship and interactions with others. Through relationships with adults and peers, students with disabilities gain friends and learn how to interact with others. Finally, social inclusion allows for integrated environments and natural supports. When students are educated in the general education setting at a young age, they develop the ability to function in different environments and rely on cues that help typically development children (see Figure 1).

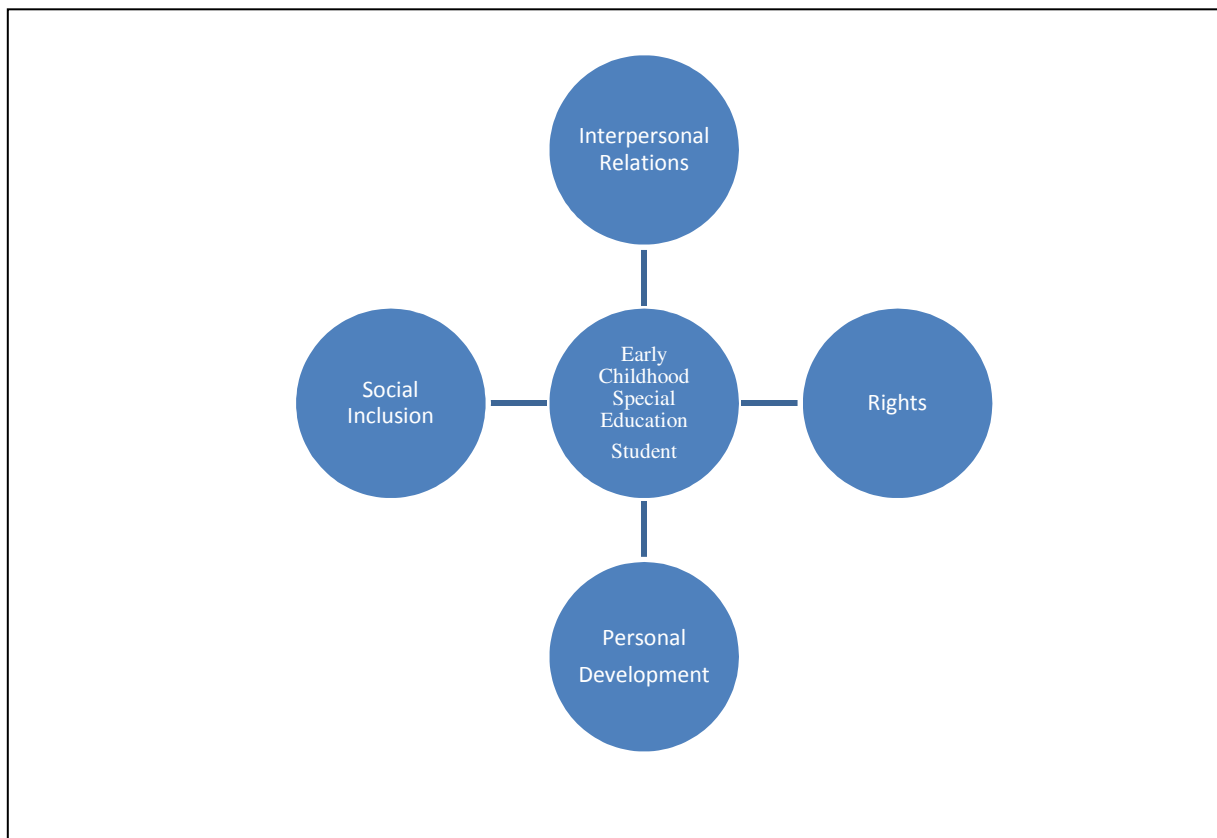


Figure 1. Quality of life domains pertaining to early childhood students with disabilities

Note: The graphic was adapted from the work of Turnbull et al. (2003).

Through these influences, a young student with a disability can develop a quality of life early in their academic career, which will pave the way for future success. Turnbull et al. (2003) suggested that policies, procedures, and practices should encompass state and district assessments that hold stakeholders accountable for student outcomes. The emphasis on quality of life complements students with disabilities' academic education. The ultimate emphasis is on holistic outcomes, which cannot be achieved by primarily focusing on the academics. IEPs that are solely based upon academic content standards do not address long-term goals for students with disabilities that affect their quality of life.

### **Louisiana Grade Level Expectations**

According to the Louisiana's Department of Education's website, Louisiana's Grade-Level Expectations (GLEs) identify what all students should know or be able to do by the end of each grade from pre-kindergarten through grade 12 in math, English, science, and social studies (Retrieved from <http://www.doe.la.us>). GLEs are referenced in various terms in different states but analogous to content state standards and/or common core standards. The implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will occur in all grade levels in Louisiana by fall of 2013. Because GLEs for the state of Louisiana begin in pre-kindergarten, early childhood students with disabilities' access to and progress in the pre-kindergarten curriculum is a major focus for future learning. According to Esptein, Pruette, Priestly, and Lieberman, (2009) who examined best practices in a longitudinal study of 38 states with state-funded pre-kindergarten programs, pre-kindergarten GLEs should be aligned with and support GLEs for kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Additionally, they recommended that it may be advantageous to special education pre-kindergarten students to be educated in programs that have curricula that correlate with state mandates for general education students. Moreover, although children in early childhood classrooms are not mandated to take state standardized tests, the foundational skills learned in early grades may eventually impact high stakes tests because of the cumulative effect of learning skills from one grade level to the next one.

### **Need for the study**

Legislation has promoted the use of standards-based IEPs, and many states have adopted this concept. Research is just beginning to explore the effectiveness of standards-based IEP goals for students with disabilities' progress in the general education curriculum.

Teachers are the primary facilitators of curriculum implementation and are expected to implement a curriculum to address the needs of students with disabilities, which may include more than GLEs. Because teachers are an integral part of the IEP process, including the implementation of IEP goals within the curriculum, their perceptions of the effectiveness of standards-based IEP goals are critical. Moreover, since individuals who create policies are typically not those who implement the policies, the perspective of teachers about standards-based IEP goals is an important contribution. The purpose of this study was to ascertain pre-kindergarten general and special education teachers' perceptions of the usage of standards-based IEP goals and to assess the extent to which those teachers perceive standards based IEP goals to be effective in measuring student progress.

Although usage of standards-based IEP goals is not standard practice in every state, 45 states are using standards-based IEP goals or are in the process of implementing them (Ahern,



2010). Standards-based IEP goals are written to reflect the GLEs of all students in a certain grade. Because the usage of standards-based IEP goals is not standard practice in every state, not mandated by federal law, and a relatively new practice, little or no research exists concerning their usage and efficacy (Ahern). Currently, the usage of grade level expectations and their impact on students with disabilities' achievement are based upon results that are not conclusive.

### **Research Questions**

The efficacy of standards-based IEP goals was explored by two overarching questions: (1) To what extent do teachers perceive that standards-based IEP goals are effective in addressing students with disabilities' needs? (2) To what extent do teachers perceive that they implement a curriculum that adequately addresses students with disabilities' access to and progress in the general education curriculum?

### **Terminology**

Commonly used terms in this study are defined for ease of understanding.

*Common Core State Standards (CCSS):* To prepare students for college and the workforce, these standards define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education in order to be academically successful (Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org>).

*Grade Level Expectations (GLEs):* These are the skills that all students should know or be able to do by the end of each grade from prekindergarten through grade 12 until full implementation of the Common Core State Standards in fall of 2013 (Retrieved from <http://www.doe.state.la.us>).

*High stakes testing:* "Many states and school districts mandate testing programs to gather data about student achievement overtime and to hold schools and students accountable.

Certain uses of achievement test results are termed ‘high stakes’ if they carry serious consequences for students or educators. Schools may be judged according to the school-wide average scores for their students. For individual students, high scores may bring a special diploma attesting to exceptional academic accomplishment; low scores may result in students being held back in grade or denied high school diploma” (American Educational Research Association, 2000, para. 3).

*Standards-based accountability* “NCLB requires states to adopt content and achievement standards, to measure student progress toward those standards, and to implement a series of interventions and sanctions in schools and districts that fail to meet their targets” (Stecher & Naftel, 2006, p.1).

*Standards-based IEPs:* “Using state standards as the framework for an IEP” (Ahern, 2010, p.13)

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The tenets of federal laws No Child Left Behind and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act have resulted in an increase of students with disabilities being educated in inclusive classroom. These educational mandates require that students with disabilities receive access to and make progress in the general education curriculum. The laws also necessitate the inclusion of more students with disabilities' scores on state standardized tests combined with general education students' test scores.

#### **Access to the general education curriculum**

IDEA specifies access to the general education curriculum. Agran, Alper, and Wehmeyer (2002) determined that access to the general education included: (a) general education contexts, (b) instruction that is based upon general content, (c) high expectations that incorporate participation and progress in general education curriculum, and (d) assessment that includes accountability measures. The contexts are further defined as: (1) the incorporation of the general education classroom setting, (2) the presence of typically developing peers, and (3) the participation in general education activities with general education materials. Therefore, because the law does not specifically indicate how these concepts are to be applied, implementation is predicated upon individual states' interpretations.

#### **Placement related to IEP goals**

The requirement for students with disabilities to receive access to the general education curriculum incited a debate among educators about whether or not students with disabilities'

goals can be met in a regular classroom (Conner & Ferri, 2007). Research exists that suggests access to general education curriculum will best facilitate learning and enable teachers to educate students with disabilities (Cross, Traub, Hitter-Pishgahi, & Sheldon, 2004; 20 U.S. C. § 1400 *et seq.* (a)-(d)). Reinforcing this side of the debate are the results of a study conducted by Odom, Schwartz, and the Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion (ECRII) (2002) that showed students can make as much progress on their IEP goals in early childhood inclusive settings as they do in non-inclusive settings by providing a full range of supplementary aides and services to students with disabilities. According to IDEA, services and aides must be considered when determining placement of students with disabilities in the appropriate classroom settings (34 C.F.R. Appendix A). The laws clearly specify that students with disabilities must have opportunities to be in the general education setting as the initial placement. The presumption is that students will initially be placed in the general education setting, and if the student does not progress, then considerations can be made for a more restrictive setting.

### **Benefits of early placement in general education classroom**

The importance of initial student placement in general education settings, with the necessary supports, cannot be discounted. Research supports that students who are in inclusive settings in early childhood have a higher probability of remaining in the general education classroom in future grades. Hanson et al. (2001) found in a longitudinal study focused on the least restrictive environment of students with disabilities that 60% of pre-kindergarten students that were in inclusive settings remained in some form of inclusion five years later.

The impact of the least restrictive environment on students with disabilities is an important influence on the usage of standards-based IEP goals since the likelihood of consistent

exposure to grade level content increases when students are in general education settings. Odom et al. (2002) found that the early childhood general education curriculum, comprised of content standards (called Grade Level Expectations in Louisiana public school systems) that all students must master is more likely to be utilized in settings with typically developing students versus a self-contained or segregated environment.

### **Placement in Inclusive Settings**

Not only can academics be enhanced in an inclusive setting, but it can also facilitate students with disabilities' development of age-appropriate social/behavioral skills (McDonnell Thorson, Disher, Mathot-Buckner, Mendel, & Ray, 2003). Research revealed that students with disabilities in the inclusive environment in elementary schools did not negatively impact the achievement of general education students on state mandated criterion-referenced tests, based upon mastery of content standards in reading/language arts and math. Additionally, the students with disabilities made significant progress on social and adaptive skills. When the LRE is a self-contained classroom, students may have more difficulty progressing socially, academically, or behaviorally. Therefore, if the LRE for students with disabilities is not the general education classroom full-time, schools may opt to provide a percentage of services in inclusive settings in order to learn social and behavior skills from general education peers.

Progress in the general education curriculum is not only mandated by IDEA, but essential to address higher accountability requirements of students with disabilities since the passage of NCLB. Because NCLB mandates that more students with disabilities are assessed using state standardized tests while fewer students with disabilities are eligible for alternative assessment,

access to and progress in the general education setting is crucial at an early age for students with disabilities achievement (Bowe, 2007).

### **Issues providing access to general education curriculum**

Uneasiness persists among educators in the implementation of access to the general education curriculum and provision of opportunities for students with disabilities (Ryndak, Moore, & Orlando, 2010). This apprehension may be fueled by the increasing number of students with disabilities in the general education settings and for longer periods of time during the instructional day. According to the U.S. Department of Education in 2008, 58 percent of the six million students who qualify for services under IDEA spent more than 80 percent of their day in general education classrooms (Retrieved from <http://www.nces.ed.gov>). This is an increase of four percent since 2006 (Causton-Theoharis, 2009).

### **Teachers' attitudes about inclusion**

General education teachers have expressed concerns over the amount of time that may be necessary to help students with disabilities reach their goals (Idol, 2006) and how that time may affect the general education students in inclusive classrooms (Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004). Because of the lack of knowledge, training, and experience of many general educators, the time trying to educate students with disabilities may be consumed in understanding the disability and how to properly address the students' needs. The worry is that the additional time will be detrimental to other students (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003).

In spite of reported benefits of inclusive classrooms, some teachers are resistant to inclusive settings because of their fear that their general education students' achievement will be affected by students with disabilities in the same classroom (Peck et al., 2004). Elhoweris and

Alsheikh (2006) used Q-methodology, the Q-sort, to explore the differences between the general and special educators' attitudes about inclusive settings. Ten teachers, five special educators and five general educators, were asked to rank order a set of statements pertaining to inclusion including: (a) academic aspects, (b) socialization aspects, and (c) legal rights in education including issues concerning students with disabilities in the general education classroom. These teachers had experience teaching elementary, middle, high school, or a combination. The findings showed that the majority of general education teachers did not recognize the benefits of inclusion, especially for students with significant disabilities.

Idol (2006) had similar findings. She found that four out of five general education teachers, teaching in elementary, middle, and high school, interviewed reported detrimental effects of inclusive classrooms, including the extra time it took to work with students with disabilities. The extra time to help students with disabilities may affect the general educators' willingness to modify and adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the students with disabilities and may ultimately result in the eventual lowering of standards to accommodate students with disabilities (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). Despite some hesitation, all of the teachers interviewed by Idol cited the lack of training to work with students with disabilities in the general education environment as the cause of their resistance and apprehension.

### **Students with significant disabilities**

Because of a gap in knowledge and experience working with students with more significant disabilities, some general educators may not provide access to the general education curriculum despite their inclusive settings. In a study by Agran, Alper, and Wehmeyer (2002), the researchers found that 85% of the 84 general and special educators, teaching students in

kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, surveyed did not feel that their students with disabilities with more significant disabilities should have access to the general education curriculum, despite their placement in inclusive settings and the laws. The teachers cited the lack of a clear district policy addressing inclusive practices, the lack of collaboration between general and special educators, and the lack of administrative support as the reasons for the exclusion. Furthermore, many general educators only assessed students with disabilities with significant disabilities based upon their functional IEP goals, which did not address the general education curriculum. This study was conducted prior to the creation and widespread use of standards-based IEP goals.

Similar results were found in a study by Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, and Agran (2003). A time-sampling procedure was used to observe 33 middle school students with intellectual disabilities (referred to as mental retardation in the article) in inclusive and non-inclusive settings for at least eight and up to 16 15-minute observations per student. The findings revealed that in less than six percent of the observations, in both inclusive and non-inclusive settings, students were not taught strategies to facilitate more effective learning in the context of the general education curriculum. Another finding in this study indicated that students with significant disabilities were less likely to engage in activities linked to standards in the general education curriculum in non-inclusive setting, in less than 50% of the intervals observed versus 90% of the intervals in inclusive settings.

A study by Fisher and Frey (2001) that captured the learning experiences of three students with significant disabilities over the course of three years in inclusive settings revealed that the foci of the IEP goals were functional and age-appropriate, considered best practices, but were not based upon the general education content state standards of their classmates. Although



IDEA mandated access to the general education curriculum, special education teachers may have felt justified in creating goals for students with more significant disabilities based upon the students' functional skills that were generalizable and not based upon standards-based goals. Both general and special educators needed skills in modifying the curriculum appropriately to accommodate students with significant disabilities.

To ascertain any differences in teacher attitudes towards educating students with significant disabilities, Cook (2001) examined 70 general education inclusive teachers' attitudes about educating students with mild or *hidden disabilities*, not physically distinguishable, versus students with severe or *obvious disabilities*, physically distinguishable. Teachers, the majority of whom were teaching students in early childhood or primary grades, were asked to categorize their students based upon their feelings about having students with disabilities in their classrooms. The descriptions given were (a) attachment, (b) concern, (c) indifference, or (d) rejection. The results indicated that students with severe or obvious disabilities were placed into the indifference category and students with mild or hidden disabilities into the rejection category. Both of the studies by Fisher and Frey (2001) and Cook, were conducted prior to the widespread usage of standards-based IEP goals.

Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, and Delano (2008-2009) found in their investigation that the severity of the disability adds another complication for teachers as they attempt to address the content standards with consideration to the students' current level of performance. To address these issues, Agran et al. (2002) surmised that students with disabilities may not only benefit from being in the general education classroom, but may also benefit from instruction focused on

the general education curriculum and functional activities within the context of the specified activities.

Similar results were found in a study that focused on early childhood teachers' beliefs about and practices in inclusive classrooms (Lieber, Captell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, & Beckman, 1998). Many of teachers' interviewed from 14 early childhood settings revealed that they presented the general education curriculum in the same way to special education and general education students. No adjustments were made to account for students with disabilities. Under these circumstances, students with disabilities may not make progress in the general education curriculum, despite having access to it, because their unique learning needs may necessitate adaptations.

### **Ambiguity of accommodation**

Understanding how to support students with disabilities and promoting their progress in the general education curriculum is paramount for general and special educators.

Accommodations and modifications, identified as integral to student achievement in the general education curriculum, are mandated to support students with disabilities' progress in the general education curriculum. Well-chosen accommodations can compensate for what students cannot do by allowing them to demonstrate what they know (Fletcher, Francis, Boudousquie, Copeland, Young, Kalinowski, et al. (2006).

Byrnes (2008a) found that merely choosing appropriate accommodations may not be specific enough information for general or special educators. In her study, 33 general educators and 12 special educators responded to a survey about interpretation of accommodations. Three accommodations were investigated: (1) extended time, (2) use of a scribe, and (3) preferential

seating. The results revealed widespread connotations for each of the three terms. Preferential seating received the most diverse responses ranging from sitting close to the teacher to sitting isolated from everyone (Byrnes). Implications of this study suggest that access to the general education setting includes operationalizing accommodations to ensure general and special education teachers understand the intention of the accommodations, which may increase the likelihood of students with disabilities' progress in the general education.

In a follow-up article, Byrnes (2008b, p.20) suggested a five-step framework for creating explicit accommodations: “ (a) state the disability, (b) describe the educational impact of the disability, (c) consider upcoming educational tasks, (d) identify barriers related to the disability, and (e) write unambiguous accommodations.” The author recommended that removing the potential for unintended barriers may help students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum. Without proper accommodations or modifications (Lee, Wehmyer, Soukup, & Palmer, 2010), general educators only provide students with disabilities' access to the general education curriculum and progress may be unlikely. To increase the likelihood of progress in the general education curriculum, consensus among educators of the meaning of each accommodation is necessary.

### **Factors that affect access to and progress in general education curriculum**

To help facilitate access to the general education curriculum, many states mandate the usage of standards-based IEP goals (Ahern, 2010) beginning with pre-kindergarten. Several issues may arise for students and teachers when standards-based IEP goals are implemented which may interfere with students with disabilities' access to and progress in general education. Some of the issues concern teacher training (Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007; Brownell, Ross, Col□n

& McCallum, 2005; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey & Simon, 2005), teacher collaboration (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2011; Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Griffin, Kilgore, Winn & Otis-Wilborn, 2008; Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998), and accountability (Crawford & Tindal, 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Irons, Carlson, Lowery-Moore & Farrow, 2007; Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, & Delano, 2008-2009). These factors are important determinants in the success of implementing standards-based IEP goals within the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

### **Challenge: Teacher training**

Without proper training, general education teachers may not feel prepared to address the educational needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms. Studies that focused on preservice and inservice training clearly established the importance of teacher training to work with students with disabilities (Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007; Sari, 2007; Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005).

Brownell, Ross, Col□n, and McCallum (2005) found in their analysis of 15 teacher education programs, which included undergraduate, graduate, and certification only programs, that the majority of general education programs focused on subject matter pedagogy. Special education programs, which provided certification for students with mild to significant disabilities, focused on generic pedagogy, such as instructional methods, assessment, and individualized education plans. As a result, general educators' training did not focus on skills that assist with accommodations and modifications for their students with disabilities. Also revealed in this study, special educators' training did not adequately prepare them for co-teaching in the general education setting or lead teaching in a content area. Therefore, the

special educators may not have a solid grasp on teaching core subjects, which are the basis for standards-based IEP goals and the general education curriculum.

### **Impact of teacher training on teacher attitudes/perceptions**

Research emphasizes the importance of teacher training when educating students with disabilities. Shippen et al. (2005) conducted a survey that measured preservice teachers' perceptions about inclusive environments in regards to hostility/receptivity and anxiety/calmness. In the study, graduate and undergraduate students, with no prior coursework in special education, enrolled in a survey course on teaching exceptional children. According to a comparison of the pretest and posttest results, the teachers had less anxiety and hostility towards educating students with disabilities in inclusive settings upon completion of the course than they did prior to entering the class. These findings illustrated that teachers feel more comfortable working with students with disabilities when they have some background knowledge of disabilities and teaching strategies to work with students with disabilities. Therefore, the results reinforced that teachers should have training to work with students with disabilities before they are required to teach them.

Teacher training may contribute to the teachers' attitudes about working with students with disabilities. In a pilot study by Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez (2009), attitudes of special educators and general educators were measured in a survey to examine their views on their training preparation. According to the results, special education teachers felt significantly more prepared than general educators in the areas of: (a) planning instruction, (b) pacing lessons, (c) evaluating assignments, (d) adapting course content, (e) monitoring student progress, (f) implementing accommodations, (g) having appropriate student expectations, and (h)

participating on a team. Also, the researchers found that special educators rated pacing lessons, evaluating assignments, adapting course content, implementing accommodations, and problem-solving strategies as being significantly more important in their job than general educators. Thus, the perception of educating students with disabilities by general educators is likely to influence their interaction and expectations of students with disabilities.

### **Challenge: Collaboration**

Attitudes concerning inclusion of students with disabilities and their access to the general education curriculum may improve with support. With the increase of students in inclusive settings, collaboration among professionals, such as special education teachers, general education teachers, and related service providers, is necessary (Brownell, Ross, Col□n, & McCallum, 2005; Leatherman, 2007) and may provide added support to educators that are unsure of how to teach students with disabilities. Without collaboration, special educators, as well as general educators, may find it difficult to adapt and modify the curriculum so that the students with disabilities can make progress toward IEP goals.

IDEA states that an IEP team should consist of at least one general education teacher and at least one special education teacher (20 U. S. C. § 614 (d)(3)(B)). Therefore, collaboration is encouraged as a component of IEP meetings under the laws of the federal government and assists teachers in preparation for the IEP meeting and context of the IEP.

Collaboration should occur in many contexts, not just for IEP meetings. It is particularly beneficial when planning for accountability standards, professional development, and multicultural issues in addition to planning lessons (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). According to Ernest Johnson, (1999, p. 387), the response to addressing accountability is

collaboration. He states the goal of collaboration is “to establish an emotional bond through trust that develops documentation that appropriate success and learning has occurred for all participants of the group.” In other words, as a result of collaboration, the group will continue to improve as each individual contributes something significant to the outcome. When individuals collaborate, everyone can contribute as a team to student outcomes, and everyone can have ownership of the results.

### **Time to collaborate**

Interactions with colleagues may also affect attitudes about educating students with disabilities. Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, and Otis-Wilborn (2008) conducted a three-year study to investigate 36 first-year special education teachers’ perceptions about their relationships with general educators. In the first two years of the study, the researchers collected qualitative data via interviews from students who graduated from the University of Florida and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The findings showed that the special education teachers who taught in resource rooms, self-contained settings, and inclusive classrooms reported a successful first year if they communicated and collaborated with general educators. However, the problems that were identified by over half of the first-year special education teachers were lack of time to collaborate and communicate with general educators. In other words, special educators felt the lack of interaction with general educators impacted their success as a teacher. More time was needed for collaboration.

Analogous to the findings in Griffin et al. (2008), Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz (1998) found that the majority of the 128 early childhood teachers and service providers (39 special educators, 35 general educators, 35 paraeducators, and 19 related service providers) surveyed

about inclusive settings cited a lack of time as the foremost issue in collaborative planning between general and special educators. They also reported that sufficient training on implementation of collaborative strategies, such as Co-teaching Universal Design Template (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2007) or Inclusive, Differentiated, and Collaborative Planning Template (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008), was not offered to them, and a three-hour training one time does not suffice.

Although educators and related service providers were generally positive about early childhood inclusive settings in the study by Stoiber et al. (1998), their optimism towards properly addressing students with disabilities' academic needs seemed to be contingent upon the significance of the students' disabilities in their classrooms. Students with speech delays, learning disabilities, or mild cognitive delays were more easily accommodated by general education teachers and viewed in a positive light. On the other hand, students with autism or neurological disorders were more difficult to include in the general education curriculum. Limited time and opportunities to collaborate were cited as barriers to inclusion and contributed to general educators' anxiety concerning students with more intensive classroom needs.

Other school personnel, besides general and special educators, have expressed concern about collaboration. Research by Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, and Schertz (2001) revealed that 61 elementary school principals' had concerns over the lack of collaboration and lack of time to collaborate among their early childhood educators. The principals in this study were interviewed about their opinions on the challenges of inclusion with recommendations for changes to make inclusive education successful. Several principals also disclosed that many early childhood general educators did not have time to review or monitor their students with disabilities' IEPs or



time to consult with the special education teachers, much less plan or modify instruction. The principals' remarks imply that students were placed in general education classrooms with little or no modifications or accommodations to support students' access to the general education curriculum, which may include students with disabilities' progress on their IEP goals.

### **Challenge: The impact of accountability**

Because of the inclusion of more special education students' scores being incorporated with their general education peers (20 U. S. C. §§ 6301 *et seq*), the bar has been significantly raised for teachers of students with disabilities as well as general education teachers.

Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, and Reschly (2001) found that 249 general educators, special educators, and school psychologists reported that they increased their efforts to improve programming as a result of *high-stakes assessments*. High-stakes assessment is characterized by its high emphasis on student achievement tied directly to accountability, with potential consequences for students who fail to meet established state standards (Hardman & Dawson, 2008).

### **Knowledge of standards and accountability measures**

Because knowledge of standards and accountability is crucial not only to general educators but also to special educators, preservice special education teachers and experienced special education teachers' knowledge of standards and accountability was examined by Irons, Carlson, Lowery-Moore, and Farrow (2007). The researchers used a survey to measure 223 Pre-Kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade preservice and experienced general and special education teachers' perceptions and surmised that both groups understood the necessity for *alignment* of the curriculum to state standards for accountability purposes. Browder, Spooner, Wakeman, Trela,

and Baker (2006, p. 313) define alignment as “fidelity or match between instruction, standards, and assessment.” These results clarify the need for both preservice and experienced special education teachers to have an understanding of what accountability entails.

### **Alignment to state standards**

In a study that attempted to measure the alignment of curriculum to state standards, Kurz, Elliott, Wehby, and Smithson (2010) surveyed 18 general and special education teachers about three formative assessments given to their students over the course of the year. The results revealed that correlation between alignment and student achievement became more evident after students had continuous exposure to the general education curriculum for six months or longer. Limitations of the study include small sample size and no differentiation of results between general and students with disabilities. However, the data suggested that the greater the length of time students are given access to the general education curriculum that was aligned with standards, the greater the potential for student achievement on assessments aligned with the same standards. This study indicates that access to the general education curriculum helps students’ progress in the general education curriculum.

Although teachers may comprehend the importance of standards-based accountability, the necessity to teach basic skills to students with disabilities may interfere with their access to the general education curriculum. An emphasis on remedial skills may reduce students with disabilities’ exposure to curriculum that is necessary for students to have high achievement on the state assessments (Wright, 2003). The elimination or reduction of grade-level content may have an impact on students with disabilities who are not prepared to master grade level testing.

However, remediation may be necessary for students with disabilities to get their individual needs met through basic skills training.

*Teaching to the test*, or solely teaching material that is included in a state-approved curriculum, may limit what is being taught only to concepts included on the state assessments (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006). Students with disabilities need to be taught skills that build upon prior skills, and then they need to learn how generalize these skills in other contexts (Bowe, 2007). Narrowing the scope of instruction to focus on what the students need to know to pass standardized tests limits students with disabilities' exposure to important precursory information that is often necessary for them to reach their IEP goals (Higgins et al.). Achieving a viable balance between individualized goals for students with disabilities and facilitating progress in the general education curriculum is complex and challenging for all teachers and administrators.

Standards-based IEP goals may include mandates to address the general education curriculum, but their usage may limit the needs of students with disabilities being met. Without individualization of IEP goals, teachers and students may flounder. These factors may influence teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEPs and whether or not they benefit students with disabilities in the long run.

### **Long-term outcomes for students with disabilities**

In June of 2010, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governors Association for Best Practices (NGA Center) released Common Core State Standards, which are standards that were created to provide universal academic standards within and among states. Common Core State Standards provide rigorous grade-level expectations for English

Language Arts (ELA) and math to facilitate a successful transition from high school to college to career. To date, 45 states have adopted these common core content standards, and Louisiana will implement the standards in fall of 2013 in replacement of GLEs that are currently used.

Although the standards only address kindergarten through 12th grade, many states, including Louisiana, have written their own pre-kindergarten standards that align with the common core state standards that will also be implemented in the fall of 2013 (Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/>).

Despite the acknowledgement of the need for these standards to be applied to students with disabilities, only summaries of tenets of special education laws, such as the provision of IEPs and the need for supplementary supports and aids, is offered on the national common core state standards website as guidance to implement the standards with students with disabilities (Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/>). Therefore, although the presentation of common core states standards is a way for all states to uniformly address ELA and math, the utilization of common core state standards and their implementation still presents unanswered questions about the usefulness of standards-based IEP goals for students with disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

The federal laws mandate that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum and make progress. The extant literature conducted over the last decade indicates that despite the attempts of Congress to raise the standards for students with disabilities, specifically in reference to accountability, general and special educators have not always been able to address the needs of all students.

To support efforts to align IEP goals with general education curriculum, most states are requiring that IEP goals correlate to GLE for all students. Thus, goals become standards-based IEP goals (Ahern, 2010). Many states require pre-kindergarten students to master academic core standards because of the important foundational skills students learn in early childhood education. Therefore, the efficacy of standards-based IEP goals is not only relevant in all grades, it is especially important to students with disabilities in early educational experiences.

Standards-based IEP goals have gained popularity in the last few years. However, research shows that their effectiveness has not been investigated. Therefore, the examination of the usefulness of standards-based IEP goals for students with disabilities in early childhood education is of particular importance.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter delineates the methodology used in this study. The sections include the purpose of the study, research questions, participant selection criteria, survey development, data collection, methods of data analysis, limitations, and the summary.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEPs and how effective they are in measuring student progress. Based upon the literature, several factors emerged as influences for teachers working with students with disabilities: training to work with students with disabilities (Boe, Shin, & Cook, 2007; Brownell, Ross, Col□n, & McCallum, 2005; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005), teachers' collaboration with other educators (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2011; Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008; Stoiber, Gettinger, Goetz, 1998) and teachers' accountability for educating students with disabilities (Cook, 2001; Crawford & Tindal, 2006; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Irons, Carlson, Lowery-Moore, & Farrow, 2007; Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, & Delano, 2008-2009). Further examination of the literature indicated that many educators do not feel competent or interested in educating students with more significant needs (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006), and the accommodations to provide support to students with disabilities in the general education classrooms are not clearly defined (Byrnes, May, 2008).

Standards-based IEP goals, which align IEP goals with grade level expectations, are used to address students with disabilities needs (Ahern, 2010). However, without the knowledge of how to modify goals or implement strategies to reach the goals, many teachers present the material/lesson to students with disabilities without appropriate instructional approaches (Lieber, Captell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, & Beckman, 1998; Wehmeyer, Lattin, Lapp-Rincker, & Agran, 2003).

Because students with disabilities must have access to the general education curriculum (20 U.S. C § 1401 (3), 34 C.F. R. § 300.7), students with disabilities may not receive adequate instruction in foundational skills that most students master in early childhood education or primary grades (Bowe, 2007). The shift towards usage of standards-based IEP goals, coupled with the mandate of access to the general education curriculum, may prevent students with disabilities from exposure to requisite skills and knowledge. This study was focused on teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of standards-based IEP goals and the implementation of those goals in the general education curriculum.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching research questions were: (1) To what extent do teachers perceive that standards-based IEP goals are effective in addressing students with disabilities overall needs? and (2) To what extent do teachers perceive that they implement a curriculum that adequately addresses students with disabilities access to and progress in the general education curriculum? These research questions were developed to determine what factors may influences teachers' perceptions of standards-based IEP goals. After a review of dozens of studies, common themes emerged as factors that may influence teachers' perceptions about issues that affect special

education and students with disabilities. Narrowing the issues to common themes helped create the questions.

### **Factors**

Three key factors were operationalized for this study, although several other factors emerged through review of the literature. The first factor focused on the training that educators received to work with students with disabilities. Training includes pedagogy, but also, instructional methods, assessments, individualized education plans, and core content areas (Brownell, Ross, Col□n & McCallum, 2007).

The second factor involved the opportunities teachers have to collaboratively plan and work together. Leatherman (2007) found that for inclusive practices to be successful, special education teachers must have time to plan together with general education teachers (Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008) to create plans that include lessons, activities, and assessments (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009) and collaborate with related service providers (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998) to create IEP goals.

The third factor examined the impact of accountability. According to the United States Department of Education's website, accountability is measured by each state setting academic standards for students should know and learn. Student academic achievement is measured annually for every child, and the results are publicly released (Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov>).

### **Participant Selection Criteria**

Participants in this study were selected from special and general education pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers. To ascertain the demographics of the sample, personal



information, such as sex, race, years of experience teaching in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten, specialty area (content area of general education or areas of certification in special education), and highest degree were asked (see Appendix A). Also, there were specific criteria for participation:

Criterion 1: Teachers with certification in one of the following areas: early childhood education, early intervention, kindergarten, or special education of any type.

Criterion 2: Teachers with at least two years of teaching experience.

Criterion 3: General and special education teachers that taught a special education pre-kindergarten or kindergarten student in the last two years.

Criterion 4: Teachers who had experience with standards-based IEP goals for young children.

**Demographic data**

All of the participants who answered the survey were female (n=100). Of the respondents, most were Caucasian (n=74) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Frequency of Distribution of Respondents by Race*

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Race	n	Percent
African American	18	18
Caucasian	74	74
Other	8	8

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Table 2 shows the age ranges of the participants. The largest number of participants (n=31) were in the 41-50 age range with a close second in the 51-60 age range (n=28). The participants were fairly equally distributed across 3 age categories from 31-60 years old.

Table 2  
*Frequency of Distribution of Respondents by Age*

Age range	n	Percent
22-30	13	13
31-40	26	26
41-50	31	31
51-60	28	28
61+	2	2

Almost two-thirds of the sample had bachelor's degrees, approximately one-third had master's degrees, and a small number had more than a master's degree as displayed in Table 3.

Thus, all participants had a higher education degree.

Table 3  
*Frequency of Distribution of Respondents by Education*

Level of Education	n	Percent
Bachelor's Degree	60	60
Master's Degree	31	31
More than Master's Degree	9	9

Likewise, almost two-thirds of the respondents had a general education background (63%), while the less than one-fifth (14%) of the teachers identified themselves as special education teachers. About one-fourth (23%) had both general and special education background, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Frequency of Distribution of Respondents by Personnel Preparation Program*

Personnel Preparation Program	n	Percent
Special Education	14	14
General Education	63	63
Both	23	23

The majority of participants had a general education certification while less than half of the teachers had special education certification as shown in Table 5. These results are similar to reinforce the personnel preparation program results.

Table 5  
 Frequency of Distribution of Respondents by Certification

Certification Area	n	Percent
Pre-Kindergarten	60	60%
Early Intervention	16	16%
Significant Disabilities	3	3%
Deaf Education	0	0%
Educational Diagnostician	1	1%
Kindergarten	73	73%
Mild/Moderate	19	19%
Visual Impairment	0	0%
Behavior Specialist	0	0%
Other	13	13%

Note: Teachers may have obtained more than one certification, which would account the certifications total to exceed 100.

The demographic information also showed that was a wide range in number of years of teaching experience and experience with IEPs that included goals with GLEs. The range of the number of years of teaching experience is 0-40 with a mean of 15.5 years. The range of the number of years of experience with IEPs that included goals with grade level expectations was 0-30 years with a mean of 9.03 years.

### Survey Development

A survey, called *Teachers' Perceptions of IEP Goals (TPIG)*, was developed by this researcher to investigate perceptions of IEPs and the efficacy of using standards-based goals to address students with disabilities needs (see Appendix B). According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), most researchers create their own surveys because the information they are seeking is not available elsewhere.

The 14-item survey with two open-ended questions was created with the intention of ascertaining if a relationship exists among the factors (collaboration, training, ambiguity of

accommodations, attitudes, progress in the general education curriculum, and accountability) discussed in the literature and if these factors affect teachers' perceptions related to students with disabilities and their IEP goals. Moreover, each question was linked to one of the two research questions (see Table 6). The instrument consisted of 14 Likert scale questions, two open-ended questions, and 12 demographic questions. The questions using the Likert scale were presented with a continuum for responses with the range of 1 for *almost always* to 5 for *never*. There was no rank order adjective given for choices 2, 3, or 4.

Table 6

*Content Domain for TPIG*

Survey Question	Research Question	Factor	Content Domain
Read IEPs	Goals	Collaboration	Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, (2001)
Wrote or gave input for IEPs	Goals	Collaboration	Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz (1998)
Sufficient training	Goals	Training	Brownwell, Ross, Col□n, & McCallam (2005)
Clearly defined accommodations	Goals	Ambiguity of accommodation	Byrnes (2008a)
Desire for more training	Goals	Training	Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon (2005)
Talk to teacher/service providers	Goals	Attitudes	Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly (2003); Idol (2006)

Time with other professionals	Goals	Collaboration	Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn (2008)
Benefits of general education setting	Curriculum	Progress in the general education curriculum	Odom, Schwartz, ECR II (2002)
Awareness of available resources	Curriculum	Ambiguity of accommodation	Byrnes (2008a)
Implementation of modifications	Goals	Ambiguity of accommodation	Byrnes (2008a); Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup, & Palmer (2010)
Administrative support	Curriculum	Collaboration	Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, (2001)
Use of CBMs to create goals	Curriculum	Accountability	Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly (2001)
GLEs help address needs	Curriculum	Accountability	Irons, Carlson, Lowery-Moore, & Farrow (2007)
Ignore GLEs to focus on needs	Goals	Accountability	Wright (2003)

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Note: Linear regression was the inferential statistic calculated for each question.

### **Validity**

According to Rubio, Berg-Weger, Tebb, Lee, and Rauch (2003, p. 94), content validity “refers to the extent to which the items on a measure assess the same content or how well the content material was sampled in the measure.” Because the survey was created for this study, the use of experts was necessary to determine whether the survey measured what it was intended

to measure. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) recommend that an expert panel review directions of the survey, recording procedures, relevance of topics to the research focus, and ease of understanding. Moreover, the usage of potential research subjects on the panel ensures that the population is represented (Rubio et al.). This study focused on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers so the expert panel, who received a paper copy of the survey, consisted of three current special education prekindergarten teachers, one current and two former general education kindergarten teachers. In addition, a director of intervention services at a charter school, that taught pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, reviewed the on-line survey for ease of usage of the electronic survey and the other suggested areas of review. Based upon the recommendations, wording in some of the questions was clarified.

### **Reliability**

To measure the degree of association between the questions, Cronbach's alpha was calculated using SAS 9.3. Cronbach's alpha measures the internal consistency, which is "the degree of internal correlation between all of the items and the focus area" (Carey & Warner, 2005, p. 118). According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian, (2009), internal consistency can be measured in three ways. Because the TPIG survey offers five response choices on the Likert scale, the Cronbach's alpha was the appropriate choice. The assumption is that if the coefficient is high, then every item on the survey is measuring the same construct (teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEP goals), and the participants should answer the questions similarly on the parts being compared with the differences attributed to measurement error (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2008).

### **Data Collection**

The surveys were disseminated electronically via e-mail (see Appendix C) after the study was approved by the University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board. The use of an e-mailed survey provided a convenient way to access participants and collect data in an efficient manner, which are some of the identified strengths of a survey (Creswell, 2009). The other advantages to using e-mail to disperse a survey include the ease of focusing on potential responders, the confidentiality of responses, and the straightforwardness of scoring (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009).

The program Qualtrics™ (<http://www.qualtrics.com>) was used to create and administer the electronic survey. Qualtrics is on-line survey software that allows users to create their own surveys, collect data, and calculate results once the surveys have been administered.

Recruitment for participation was based upon potential participants from school district websites that were listed by the chosen criteria as teachers of pre-kindergarten or kindergarten students.

An initial survey distribution was sent out to 295 potential responders in two parishes on August 19, 2012. The participants were offered a chance to win one of five \$100 gift cards from Amazon.com for completed surveys. Before the drawing, an additional 162 surveys were sent to teachers in three parishes over the next 8 weeks with three reminder e-mails to follow up.

Multiple opportunities to participate is a method to circumvent the low response rate, one of the largest drawbacks to surveys (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009).

On November 1, 2012, a random number generator from [www.randomnumbergenerator.com](http://www.randomnumbergenerator.com) was used to select 5 winners. The winners received an e-mail from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) containing a voucher worth \$100, details on redemption of the voucher, and a personalized e-mail awarding the electronic gift card.

To generate more responses, a second round of surveys, which consisted of 980 surveys, were e-mailed to potential responders from 14 parishes. They were offered with a chance to win one \$100 gift card from Amazon.com, over the course of two weeks. Four reminder e-mails were sent to nonresponders. Teachers that did not respond during the first round were not considered as likely to respond in the second round. Therefore, their names were eliminated from the second list. On November 23, 2012, [www.randomnumbergenerator.com](http://www.randomnumbergenerator.com) was used to select one winner that was notified via e-mail of winning the drawing for responding to the survey.

To increase the sample size from 1437 to 1814, a final round of surveys, consisting of 377 e-mails, was sent to potential participants in 9 parishes for one more chance to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. On December 2, 2012, a winner was chosen by [www.randomnumbergenerator.com](http://www.randomnumbergenerator.com) and awarded the voucher. Because 100 participants answered the survey, the survey was closed after the final drawing.

Teachers from twenty-eight school districts from Louisiana answered the survey: (a) Jefferson, (b) Orleans, (c) Plaquemines, (d) St. Charles, (e) St. Bernard, (f) St. Tammany, (g) Lafourche, (h) Terrebonne, (i) Assumption, (j) St. John, (k) Washington, (l) Tangipahoa, (m) St. James, (n) Ascension, (o) Livingston, (p) St. Mary, (q) Iberville, (r) St. Martin, (s) Iberia, (t) Vermillion, (u) Lafayette, (v) St. Landry, (w) Avoyelles, (x) Rapides, (y) Vernon, (z) Natchitoches, (aa) Caddo, and (bb) Bossier. They were e-mailed with details of the survey and a link to access the survey on-line. A convenience sample was used because participants had to be willing to fill out the survey (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009).



Two participants' surveys were eliminated from the sample because they did not fit the criteria. One participant was a male teacher, but he taught third and fourth grade instead of prekindergarten or kindergarten. The other teacher has not taught students with disabilities in four years although the requirement was the last two years. Because of these factors, their surveys were discarded.

### **Factors affecting data collection**

One factor that might have contributed to the data collection process was a hurricane. Hurricane Isaac, which hit the state of Louisiana, was a slow moving Category 1 storm that formed on August 21, 2012 and did not dissipate until September 1, 2012. The hurricane severely damaged parts of Louisiana, including schools. As a result, filing out a voluntary survey may not have been a priority. More than two-thirds of the responses to the survey occurred in the last month of data collection, which may indicate that hurricane damage was a factor.

Also, effective 2012-2013 school year, Louisiana required kindergarten teachers to align student expectations to Common Core State Standards (CCSS) instead of Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) (Retrieved from <http://www.doe.louisiana.la.us>). Although these changes have been discussed for several years, almost all teachers were operating with GLEs. As a result, the teachers were in the beginning stages of learning the CCSS. Taking a survey about existing practices may not have been a priority as the current practices were so different. The survey in this study was retroactive; teachers were reflecting about current or previous students.

### **Methods of Data Analysis**

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data using SAS version 9.3. The descriptive statistics are “statistical procedures used to summarize, organize, and simplify data” (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007, p. 6). Using descriptive statistics, such as measures of central tendency (mean) and measures of variability (standard deviation), the sample was analyzed. Additionally, inferential statistics were utilized to make generalizations (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007) about the perceptions of prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers.

Linear Regression was conducted to demonstrate whether or not two constructs, goals (based upon research question one) and curriculum (based upon research question two), had questions that indicated a relationship among them (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2008). Moreover, the calculations were used to identify strength of the relationship among items in relation to the dependent variable which was ignoring the grade level expectations to address the individual needs of the child.

To ascertain whether or not teachers may ignore grade level expectations and focus on the individual goals of a student (question 14), a linear model was based on questions 2-13 and the demographic questions. Then, a second model was constructed based upon analysis of each question as an independent variable to see if there was an impact upon question 14 (dependent variable). The linear models were used to investigate if the factors were related to underlying constructs.

### **Summary**

The methodology in this study was designed to examine teachers’ perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEPs. Investigating the relationship among factors identified in the literature review was the focus of the methodology in this study. Because there is limited

information regarding standards-based IEPs, research pertaining to training, collaboration, and accountability was suggested to have the potential to affect teachers' perceptions. Based upon these studies, a survey was created to collect data. Over the course of three and one-half months, there were 1814 surveys sent out to teachers with a response rate of 5.51%. The sample included teachers from 28 districts across Louisiana that includes multiple regions of the state.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEPs and how effective they are in measuring student progress. A literature review revealed several factors that seemed to influence those perceptions: accommodations for students, teaching training, collaboration among professionals, progress in the general education curriculum, attitudes about inclusion, and accountability (e.g., Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Brownell, Ross, Col□n, & McCallam, 2005; Byrnes, 2008; Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2001; Idol, 2006; Irons, Carlson, Lowery-Moore, & Farrow; Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998; Wright, 2003). By examining the relationship among these factors as they relate to teachers' perceptions, the results of the study may have the potential to shape policies regarding the usage of standards-based IEP goals for students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Questions**

This study explored the efficacy of standards-based IEP goals with two guiding questions: To what extent do teachers perceive that standards-based IEP goals are effective in addressing the needs of students with disabilities? To what extent do teachers perceive that they implement a curriculum that adequately addresses the access to and progress in the general education curriculum for students with disabilities? Initially, descriptive statistics were used to calculate survey responses.

#### **Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics that include the overall mean scores and standard deviations of the responses to questions 1-14 are presented in Table 7. The range of scores possible was a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with two adjectives that described the choices, 1 for *almost always* and 5 for *never*.

Table 7

*Means and Standard Deviations for items in TPIG*

Question number	n	M	SD
Read IEPs	100	1.0	0
Wrote or gave input for IEPs	100	1.38	0.09
Sufficient training	100	2.31	1.48
Clearly defined accommodations	100	2.62	1.40
Desire for more training	100	1.79	1.12
Talk to teacher/service providers	100	2.15	1.06
Time with other professionals	100	1.56	0.93
Benefits of general education setting	100	3.47	1.13
Awareness of available resources	100	1.73	0.96
Implementation of modifications	100	2.61	1.17
Administrative support	100	1.90	1.01
Use of CBMs to create goals	100	2.17	1.21
GLEs help address needs	100	2.32	1.28
Ignore GLEs to focus on needs	100	2.10	1.02

n=100

The participants all reported that they read the IEPs for students with disabilities in their classrooms, as shown in Question 1, read IEPs. The three highest mean scores were in Question 8, benefits of general education setting ( $M=3.47$ ), Question 4, clearly defined accommodations ( $M=2.62$ ) and Question 10, implementation of modifications ( $M=2.61$ ). Question 8, benefits of general education setting, denoted that teachers tended to not recognize the benefits of students with disabilities. The three lowest means were in Question 2, wrote or gave input for IEPs, ( $M=1.38$ ), Question 7, time with other professionals ( $M=1.56$ ), and Question 9, awareness of available resources ( $M=1.73$ ).

In Question 13, GLEs help address needs ( $M=2.32$ ), the mean score indicated that teachers were supportive of standards-based IEP goals. Although teachers indicated that GLEs may help them to address goals of students with disabilities in Question 13, they also fairly strongly indicated that they sometimes ignore the GLEs to focus on the individual needs of the student, Question 14 ( $M=2.10$ ).

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1, which examined whether or not teachers perceived that IEP goals are effective in addressing overall needs of students with disabilities, was measured by Teachers' Perceptions of IEP Goals (TPIG) survey questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10. Cronbach's alpha was calculated to determine if a relationship exists among questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 10. It is noteworthy to mention that Question 1 was not used in any inferential statistics because there was no variation in the response for it, ( $M=1$ ,  $SD=0$ ). Question 1 asked whether or not teachers had read the IEPs for students with disabilities in their classroom and all of the teachers indicated "yes."

Question 6 was also not used in the inferential statistics because it was unrelated to the other questions in the construct. In other words, Question 6 did not fit into the construct of goals as a potential indicator of teachers' perceptions. This question focused on informal communication among the teacher and the service providers.

To assess whether or not the six questions: 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 10 formed a reliable scale, a Cronbach's alpha was computed. The alpha for the six items (.82) indicated a good internal consistency as presented in Table 8.

Table 8

*Reliability Scale for IEP Goals Factor*

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Cronbach's alpha 0.82	n of items 6
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**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2, which examined whether or not teachers perceived that they implemented a curriculum that addressed access to and progress in the general education curriculum for students with disabilities, was measured by TPIG questions 8, 9, 11, 12, and 13. When a Cronbach's alpha was computed for these 5 questions (.70), the calculation indicates a reasonable internal consistency and is presented in Table 9.

Table 9

*Reliability Scale for Curriculum Factor*

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Cronbach's alpha 0.70	n of items 5
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A linear model was used to examine the overall survey questions to determine if one or more of the factors had an influence on teachers' perceptions. Question 14, which focused on meeting the individual goals of a child, was the dependent variable. Questions 2-13, which were all of the other questions on the survey, and the demographic information in questions 18-21, were the independent variables.

Table 10 shows that survey questions 2-13 and questions 18-21 had a statistically significant relationship,  $F(22, 77) = 105.00, p < .001$ . Therefore, the likelihood of variables impacting the dependent variable merely due to chance was minimal. These factors accounted for a significant amount of variance in their relationship to the dependent variable.

Question 14, the dependent variable, seemed to capture the essence of teachers' perceptions by showing that although Grade Level Expectations (GLEs) may be the guide for creating goals, sometimes teachers ignored them in order to focus on student needs that fell outside of the scope of standards-based IEP goals.

Table 10

*Linear Regression for TPIG*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Model	22	50.933	2.31	3.30	<.0001
Error	77	54.06	0.70		
Corrected Total	99	105.00			



For the second model, the questions were separated and calculated exclusively to see if the relationship of each independent variable with the dependent variable, ignoring GLEs to focus on needs, had statistical significance. When each question is tested individually, only question 12, use of CBMs to create goals,  $F(1, 77) = 5.71, p < .002$ , and question 13, GLEs help address needs,  $F(1, 77) = 5.32, p < .002, r^2 = 0.43$ , were statistically significant as presented in Table 11. This means that these two questions accounted for a significance amount of variance in their relationship to the question 14, ignore GLEs to focus on needs, the dependent variable.

Table 11

*Linear Regression by question*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Wrote/input IEPs	1	0.08	0.08	0.12	0.74
Sufficient training	1	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.74
Accommodations	1	0.43	0.43	0.62	0.43
More training	1	0.0006	0.0006	0.00	0.98
Talk to teachers	1	0.60	0.60	0.85	0.36
Time with others	1	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.90
Benefits of gen ed	1	0.55	0.55	0.78	0.38
Resources	1	0.30	0.30	0.43	0.51
Modifications	1	2.26	2.26	3.22	0.08
Support	1	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.78
Use of CBMs	1	4.01	4.01	5.71	0.02
GLEs address needs	1	3.73	3.73	5.32	0.02

Race	2	2.25	1.13	1.61	0.21
Age	4	4.42	1.11	1.57	0.19
Education	2	0.91	0.45	0.65	0.53
Personnel Prep	2	0.43	0.22	0.31	0.74

Note: Question 1 was not included in the table because all participants answered the same indicating that there was no variation in responses. Questions 15 and 16 were open-ended questions, which were not included. Question 17 was pertaining to sex of participant, and all were female so there was no variation.

A third model was calculated that investigated whether or not areas of certification had an impact of the responses on the survey,  $F(17, 82) = 105.00, p < 0.001, r^2 = 0.44$ . The factors for research question 1 (questions 2,3,4,5,7,10) and the factors for research question 2 (questions 8,9,11,12,13) along with demographic factors were the variables in this model: highest degree, personnel preparation program, certification, and types of students with disabilities. There was not a significant change in the  $r^2 = 0.44$ , only 0.01. This result indicates that these factors did not significantly impact the results (see Table 12).

Table 12  
*Linear Regression with areas related to criteria*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Model	17	46.46	2.73	3.83	<.0001
Error	82	58.54	0.71		
Corrected Total	99	105.00			

The curriculum factor questions (Questions 8, 9, 11, 12, and 13) were statistically significant. However, the grouping of questions related to goals (2,3,4,5,7,10), were not significant (Table 13).

Table 13  
*Linear Regression for each construct*

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
goals	1	0.51	0.51	0.72	0.40
curriculum	1	10.64	10.64	14.90	0.0002
race	2	0.84	0.42	0.59	0.56
age	4	3.02	0.76	1.10	0.38
highest degree	2	0.90	0.45	0.63	0.54
prep program	2	0.01	0.006	0.01	0.99
years of experience	1	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.82
pre-k	1	0.002	0.002	0.00	0.96
ei	1	0.16	0.16	0.23	0.64
k	1	0.29	0.29	0.40	0.53
mild/ moderate	1	0.006	0.006	0.01	0.93

### **Two open ended questions**

The two open-ended questions received little response. Although all of the other questions were answered by the 100 participants, only 13 responses to the first open-ended question and 15 responses to second one were provided. The first question asked participants whether or not they had any problems with using IEP goals that include grade level expectations. The second question focused on any perceived benefits of using IEP goals that include grade level expectations. Some of the responses were one word answers. Several themes emerged when the teachers defined the problems with usage of standards-based IEP goals. Essentially,

the teachers expressed concerns with the fact that some students cannot achieve goals based on standards (n=10), that the skills are not always developmentally appropriate due to students not being on grade level (n=8), that standards-based IEP goals can create stress for students (n=2), and that students with more significant disabilities may require extra help to achieve progress on the standards (n=3).

The main theme in response to question two emphasized by teachers' responses reinforced the notion that by creating goals aligned with grade level expectations, teachers were better able to prepare students who would eventually take state standardized tests and help students learn what their peers know (n=10). One teacher acknowledged that even though students' goals may be aligned with state standards, the activities can be adapted to the developmental level. Another teacher commented that by using standards-based IEP goals, her students with disabilities achieved higher scores on some assessments than some of her general education students.

### **Summary**

One hundred participants answered survey questions related to teachers' perceptions of standards-based IEP goals. Using inferential statistics, two constructs consisting of six and five questions were calculated to see how reliable the groups were. One grouping had a good internal consistency, and the other one was reasonable.

Through linear models, relationships among factors were explored. Thirteen questions that were related to one of two research questions seem to have an effect on the final question, about teachers ignoring the grade level expectations to focus on the students' needs.

Furthermore, collaboration, ambiguity of accommodations, training, attitudes, progress in the

general education curriculum, and accountability also seem to have an impact on the teacher's focus on individual goals of a student rather than solely on grade level expectations. When factors regarding the educational demographics (race, age, highest degree, personnel preparation program number of years teaching, and certification area) of teachers were added into a linear model, there was no statistical significance. Open-ended questions provided additional insight into the teachers' opinions of the pros and cons of using grade level expectations to help formulate goals.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion

This chapter contains the discussion of the findings. Limitations and delimitations of the study are denoted, and implications for general and special education teachers are provided. In closing, recommendations for future research are presented, and conclusions proffered.

According to this study, teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEP goals were influenced by several factors: (a) accommodations (Byrnes, as cited in, May, 2008), (b) collaboration (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, & Otis-Wilborn, 2008; Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998), (c) training (Brownwell, Ross, Col•n, & McCallam, 2005; Shippin, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, & Simon, 2005), (d) attitudes about inclusion (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Idol, 2006), (e) progress in the general education curriculum (Odom, Schwartz, & ECR II, 2002), and (f) accountability (Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2001; Irons, Carlson, Lowery-Moore, & Farrow, 2007). Each factor was associated with one of the two research questions. Therefore, the responses to the questions are directly linked to the research questions in the study.

### Discussion of the findings

#### Involvement with IEPs

Factor: Collaboration. All of the respondents answered that they read the IEPs for the students with disabilities that they had in the classroom ( $M=1$ ,  $SD=0$ ). In a previous study by Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, and Schertz (2001), the principals (rather than teachers) were interviewed and indicated that their early childhood special educators do not have time to consult

and/or monitor IEPs. Time may not be a factor for the teachers who answered the survey in this study.

Teachers did not just report that they read the surveys in this study. They also reported that they gave input or wrote the goals for the IEPs ( $M=1.38$ ,  $SD=0.09$ ), and many of them indicated that they talked to teachers/related service providers for input into IEP goal implementation ( $M=2.15$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ). When exploring potential factors that may influence early childhood practitioners' beliefs about including students' with disabilities, Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz (1998) found that limited time and opportunity to collaborate was the highest rated barrier among educators. Teachers in this study appeared to prioritize both reading and formulating IEPs without the barrier of time.

When looking at the study by Brotherson et al. (2001), the research was over a decade ago and prior to the passage of important legislation which could clearly impact teachers. Since 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) calls for accountability changes for all educators and revolutionized public education and its requirements (20 U. S. C. §§ 6301 *et seq*). Additionally, the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004 broadened the general education teachers' accountability to include a larger percentage of students with disabilities in state standardized test assessment scores. IDEA also mandated that in accountability changes for students with disabilities to have access to and make progress in the general education curriculum (20 U.S. C § 1401 (3), 34 C.F. R. § 300.7) . Both types of teachers, general and special educators, are currently responsible for the progress and achievement of students with disabilities in the public school system. As a result, teachers are now accountable for students

with disabilities and for both general education students and students with disabilities. Reading IEPs is critical to their success as well as the success of the students.

Because teachers in this study volunteered to complete the survey, they probably had an interest in the topic. Thus, it is credible that the teachers read IEPs of their students and contributed content to them.

### **Support for Teachers**

Factors: Collaborations, Training, Accountability. Generally, teachers responded that they felt they had administrative support when implementing grade level content for students with disabilities. This finding may be due to increased principal accountability as well as teacher accountability. Some principals may recognize that teachers need time with each other to focus on students with disabilities because their progress has a greater impact on everyone's accountability. Principals may also know that it is in their best interest to offer administrative support when implementing grade level content with students with disabilities because the lack of support will ultimately negatively affect students' with disabilities progress in the general education curriculum (Ahern, 2010).

Related to administrative support is training. The mean score ( $M=1.79$ ) indicated that teachers desire more training but also feel that, for the most part, they denoted that they had sufficient training ( $M=2.31$ ). In looking at the demographics of the respondents, 63% of the teachers were general education teachers (which closely mirrors the actual percentage in most schools). Typically, general education teachers are taught to work with general education students.



General Education teachers who are 30 years or older may not have received university training on IEPs and working with diverse students, especially since inclusive environments is a relatively “new” concept in practice. Some teachers may not have taken any special education courses in their teacher preparation program and may have only acquired knowledge of how to meet the needs of students with disabilities through experience and/or on-the-job professional development. However, most of the respondents were aware of resources ( $M=1.73$ ) available to facilitate access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.

Another type of resource is accommodations for students with disabilities. In this study, teachers indicated that they somewhat understood and implemented accommodations ( $M=2.62$ ) and modifications ( $M=2.61$ ) for students with disabilities. However, these responses were the second and third highest scores on the survey. Thus, the relativity of scores indicates that teachers could use more assistance with accommodations and modifications. Even though most IEPs have a checklist of required accommodations, teachers still may not feel competent about identifying and implementing them. Since most of the teachers are general educators in this study, they may not have had sufficient training on accommodations and modifications. However, the special educators should be well versed and able to support and implement modifications for individual students. Although teachers felt like they had administrative support and were aware of resources, they responded that they desired more training. Also, sufficient information about accommodations and modifications was lacking from the perspective of the teachers.

### **Inclusive classrooms**

Factors: Attitudes and progress in the general education curriculum. The plethora of research shows mixed feelings about students with disabilities being included in the general education classroom (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Cook, 2001; Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2006; Idol 2006, McDonnell Thorson, Disher, Mathot-Buckner, Mendel , & Ray, 2003; Peck, Staub, Gallucci, & Schwartz, 2004). In this study, the highest score ( $M=3.47$ ) was related to teachers recognizing the benefits of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Apparently, teachers do not clearly recognize the benefits of inclusive classrooms, as they clearly denoted in their responses. In this study, more than half of the teachers are general educators. Despite support and training, these teachers may still feel apprehensive about being held accountable for students that they are not comfortable working with in their classrooms. Knowledge and understanding of how to educate students with disabilities does not always equate to a decrease of anxiety or a change in attitude about addressing students with disabilities needs. Additionally, some special education teachers may prefer to work with their students with disabilities in self-contained settings where they focus solely on their individual needs of the child. Also, teachers in self-contained classrooms have more control over their day and the experiences of their students.

### **Grade Level Expectations**

Factors: Accountability. Although teachers admitted that grade level expectations help them address students with disabilities needs, they also responded that they will ignore them sometimes to focus on meeting individual goals not addressed by general education curriculum. The teachers mean scores were relatively similar when responding to use of grade level expectations. Teachers may find the usage of standards-based IEP goals a convenient guide to

writing IEP goals that helps keep students with disabilities learning what their peers learn. The responses for ignoring the standards-based goal to focus on individual needs ( $M=2.10$ ) show that the majority of teachers will ignore the grade level expectations to address their students' needs. Teachers recognize that students' rate of learning, severity of disability, and ability to retain information and generalize across settings may affect student achievement. By ignoring the grade level expectations, teachers are educating students based upon their individual characteristics versus what students in a particular grade level need to learn.

### **Internal Consistency Reliability**

Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the strength of the relationship among the factors for each construct, goals and curriculum. The calculations showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha=.82$ ) for goals and reasonable internal consistency ( $\alpha=.70$ ) for curriculum (Leech, Barrett, Morgan, 2008). The results indicated that based upon the content domain for each question and the associated research question, the items were related to form a reliable scale. However, Question 6, talk to teacher/service providers, did not have a relationship with the rest of the questions. Talking to other teachers or related services providers may only provide teachers with descriptive information rather than input to address the students' goals. This result may indicate that talking to another professional does not affect the perceptions of the effectiveness of aligning IEP goals to grade level expectations.

### **Linear Models**

Linear regression was selected as the statistic to ascertain if the factors identified in this study predicted teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based IEP goals. According to the results of the overall  $F$  tests, the calculation was statistically significant. Because the alpha

level was  $p < .001$ , the relationships among the variables were most likely not due to chance. The prior research that was investigated to create this study reinforced that the factors identified in this study did help shape teachers' perceptions, and the overall  $F$  test confirmed these findings.

A second model, which included individual calculations of the  $F$  test for each item, resulted in statistical significance for Question 12, use of CBMs, and Question 13, GLEs help address students' needs. These two questions specifically addressed the use of assessments and grade level standards when teachers created goals. Curriculum-based measurements (CBMs) help teachers assess students' current level of performance. Statistical significance of this factor may have indicated that the use of CBMs can be helpful for the teachers to adapt the goals based upon students' performance. Moreover, the GLEs can help the teachers address students' needs, especially when CBMs are used to create achievable goals.

### **Open-ended Responses**

The majority of teachers that answered the first open-ended question about seeing problems with using standards-based IEP goals expressed that some of their students could not achieve based upon standards. This finding illustrated that students with disabilities may have different developmental issues, rates of learning, and behavioral concerns that may interfere with learning grade level content along with their peers. The state of Louisiana recognized these factors and addressed it with students with significant disabilities. The grade level expectations were simplified into extended standards to help students with significant disabilities address grade level content modified to a level that was deemed achievable by the state (Retrieved from [www.doe.state.louisiana.us](http://www.doe.state.louisiana.us)). The respondents may have been referring to the students that do not qualify for extended standards but are not able to learn grade level content.

Teachers acknowledged that there were benefits to IEP goals that included grade level expectations. Most of the teachers that responded to the second open-ended question reported the advantages of grade level standards as providing skills for standardized tests, affording students with disabilities opportunities to progress in the general education curriculum, and preparing students for success in all aspect of their lives. By aligning the goals to GLEs, teachers may also feel that because of their accountability, all of the students in the classroom should be exposed to the grade level content to increase the teachers' success with a diverse classroom.

### **Overall Teacher Responses**

None of the questions had a mean of either 4 or 5 so teachers indicated that they never or almost never experienced the concept. Based on these responses and the relativity of scores, teachers' perceptions did not have strong negative influences. Moreover, because of the laws that have increased accountability, teachers may be inclined to do what is necessary to give students with disabilities access to and progress in the general education curriculum by addressing their grade level needs. Ironically, despite the largely positive responses, the outlier score ( $M=3.47$ ) was about the benefits of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

### **Study Limitations**

A major limitation of this study was the low response rate, 5.51%. This may be due to a variety of reasons including the survey being distributed in the beginning of the year when teachers are busy or Hurricane Isaac. With a low response rate, generalizability of the survey results may be difficult (Gay, Mills, & Airisian, 2009).

Another limitation of this study was the fact that the survey was created by the researcher and did not go through rigorous validity and reliability checks. When a new survey created for the purpose of a study, validity and reliability of the instrument is limited (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2008). Because this is a topic with sparse research, an instrument based on a literature review and researcher's experiences was created.

The lack of standard protocols when writing IEPs is a limitation. Some districts may primarily focus on the grade level expectations when writing IEP goals with minimal consideration to students' level of performance or rate of learning. Other districts may adjust the goals to account for students' individual needs including requisite skills that may not be addressed on grade level. Because the term standards-based IEP goals is not operationalized, it may not convey the same meaning among districts and states. Alignment of IEP goals to standards is a relatively new concept, as is the terminology and prescribed process. Educators may have interpreted the terminology differently when taking the survey.

On a national level, the generalizability of the results may be difficult. All states have state standards, but some are still going through the process of implementing the Common Core State Standards. Diversity among states makes the results less generalizable. Moreover, this study was only conducted in one state.

Finally, this study did not use a random sample. Participants volunteered to complete the survey. Therefore, the outcome may not represent the population of teachers in Louisiana or nationally.

### **Delimitations**

This study contains the following delimitations: (1) this research study was limited to teachers who were teaching in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten in the last two years; (2) and this research study was limited to teachers who taught in the state of Louisiana.

### **Implications for general and special educators**

This study is one of the first studies that investigated teachers' perceptions of efficacy of standards-based IEP goals. The widespread use of standards-based IEP goals coupled with the dearth of research on the subject matter was the impetus of the study. The results of this study as well as previous studies reinforce the need for more training in accommodations and modifications. Additionally, the attitudes of teachers of inclusive environments need to be addressed. With increased emphasis on specific training and overall support from everyone, all teachers may eventually recognize the benefits of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

### **Recommendations for future research**

It is clear that more research must occur in this area as the usage of standards-based IEP goals is a common practice that has limited research. Therefore, its effectiveness is only beginning to be uncovered. Conducting more research on the efficacy of standards-based IEP goals will allow for proposed revisions and suggested guidelines on how to correctly implement goals that are aligned with grade level expectations while addressing other needs that the students may have. Then, the state and national policy can be based upon research data to ensure effectiveness and relevance.

Also, the results of the survey may provide a rationale for conducting extensive research in areas that are impacted by the passage of legislation that affected public education and

accountability for all students. Because of legislation passed in the last decade or so, many universities changed their teacher training programs to offer dual certification programs or are requiring that preservice teachers take classes in general and special education. An analysis of teacher preparation programs may result in quite different outcomes since universities recognize that teachers must be able to support diverse students with various needs.

Interstate comparisons of the implementation of standards-based IEP goals may be quite informative as the large majority of states are now in the process of utilizing CCSS in virtually all states. Examining standards-based IEPs across states may help with creation and implementation of uniform protocols for aligning IEP goals with grade level content.

Because accountability is at the forefront of education, collaboration is promoted among teachers, administrators, and parents. Investigating the relationship among key individuals that have relationships with students with disabilities and how they collaboratively plan and implement goals with each other may provide insight into ways that individuals' goals can be addressed while aligning them to the grade level expectations. By having the perspective of individuals that see the students with disabilities in different environments, mastery of crucial skills across various settings may increase.

Additionally, the type of disability a student has may affect a teacher's perception of how effective standards-based goals are in addressing the student's needs and progress in the general education curriculum. This study examined students with disabilities as a whole. Future research may help decipher which students' standards-based IEP goals are appropriate for and which ones should have some individualized ones.



More research may help educators more clearly define what benefits they observe when implementing standard-based IEP goals. These areas can include the value and/or the legitimacy of using them. Despite seeing the benefits, some teachers may not see the value in standards-based IEP goals or believe that they should be used in alignment with goals.

Finally, this study can be extended to include interviews of teachers. A qualitative study can provide more in depth explanations of why teachers feel how they feel about standards-based IEP goals. Further analysis can also help refine practice.

### **Conclusion**

The use of standard-based IEP goals to measure students with disabilities achievement is a practice that arose from the mandates that required students with disabilities to have access to general education curriculum, make progress in general education curriculum, and be included in state standardized assessments and high-stakes testing. Standards-based IEP goals may help students with disabilities learn what their general education peers learn. However, because of a lack of research, their efficacy is undetermined.

Learning what general education students are being taught is not the only focus of special education. Students with disabilities may need access to the general education curriculum in order to make progress, but they also may need to focus on their individualized goals, which may be based upon functional or social needs rather than academic ones. Goals that focus on individualized needs may incorporate skills not addressed in state standards. Research may help districts refine the implementation of standards-based IEP goals to include needs outside of academic goals.

Special education has evolved tremendously over the past 40 years. Gone are the days when students with disabilities were forced to be housed in separate buildings. Their rights to have their needs met have been recognized, expanded and enforced. However, it is crucial that students with disabilities' needs are recognized. Students with disabilities will always require education that is based upon their individual needs. Standards-based IEP goals should complement individualized goals of students with disabilities.

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## Appendices

**Appendix A** Demographics

Sex: Female Male

Race: African American Caucasian Hispanic Biracial Asian Native American Pacific Islander

Age: 22-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 +61

Highest degree:

Bachelor's Master's Master's plus 30 Specialist Doctorate

Specialty Area: Special Education General Education

Certification: (check all that apply)

Pre-Kindergarten

Kindergarten

Early Childhood Special Education

Mild/Moderate disabilities

Significant disabilities

Visual Impairment

Deaf Education

Behavior Specialist

Autism Specialist

Educational Diagnostician

Other (describe) \_\_\_\_\_

The type of children I normally work with have:

developmental delays  or  speech and language delays only

mild/moderate delays  or  significant disabilities

**Appendix B** *Teachers' Perceptions of IEP Goals survey*

This survey is designed to examine educators' perceptions of IEPs. Many IEPs are written in alignment of students with disabilities' goals with grade level expectations (common core standards). Please respond to the question by choosing the number that best fits your *agreement* or *disagreement* of the statements.

- |  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. I have read the IEPs for the students with disabilities in my classroom.  |   |   |   |
| 1 ALMOST ALWAYS  | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|  |   |   |   |
| 2. I wrote or gave input in writing goals that are aligned with the general education curriculum on the IEPs for the students with disabilities in my classroom.           |   |   |   |
| 1 ALMOST ALWAYS  | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|  |   |   |   |
| 3. I have received sufficient training to work with students with disabilities that have IEP goals aligned with the general education curriculum.                          |   |   |   |
| 1 ALMOST ALWAYS  | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|  |   |   |   |
| 4. Accommodations on the IEPs for students with disabilities have been clearly defined by the IEP team.  |   |   |   |
| 1 ALMOST ALWAYS  | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|  |   |   |   |
| 5. I would like more training in writing and implementing goals with grade level expectations for students with disabilities.  |   |   |   |
| 1 ALMOST ALWAYS  | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|  |   |   |   |
| 6. I talk to the teacher/related service providers of the child with an IEP in my classroom for input regarding implementation of IEP goals.                               |   |   |   |
| 1 ALMOST ALWAYS  | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|  |   |   |   |
| 7. There is an adequate amount of time allotted in my instructional week to work with other professionals regarding individualized needs of my students with disabilities. |   |   |   |
| 1 ALMOST ALWAYS  | 2 | 3 | 4 |

- 8. I recognize the benefits of students with disabilities being placed in the general education classroom.  
1 ALMOST ALWAYS                      2                                      3                                      4
  
- 9. I am aware of resources that are available to assist me with providing access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities.  
1 ALMOST ALWAYS                      2                                      3                                      4
  
- 10. I know how to implement modifications for students with disabilities in my classroom.  
1 ALMOST ALWAYS                      2                                      3                                      4
  
- 11. I have administrative support in implementing grade level content for students with disabilities in my classroom.  
1 ALMOST ALWAYS                      2                                      3                                      4
  
- 12. I use results from curriculum-based assessments to help me create IEP goals that address the needs of my students with disabilities.  
1 ALMOST ALWAYS                      2                                      3                                      4
  
- 13. Grade level expectations help me to address the goals of my students with disabilities.  
1 ALMOST ALWAYS                      2                                      3                                      4
  
- 14. Sometimes, I ignore the grade level expectations and focus on meeting the individual goals of a child.  
1 ALMOST ALWAYS                      2                                      3                                      4
  
- 15. Do you see problems with the use of IEP goals that include grade level expectations? If so, please explain:
  
  
- 16. Do you see the benefits of IEP goals that include grade level expectations? If so, please explain:

## Appendix C E-mail inviting participation

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Linda Flynn, Ph. D. in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of New Orleans.

I am conducting a research study to examine teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of standards-based Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals.

I am requesting your participation, which will involve filling out an online survey that will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation is the opportunity to give your opinion about educational policies that could result in further research or potential policy revisions.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please call Dr. Flynn at (504)-280-6609. **PLEASE ONLY ANSWER THE SURVEY IF YOU HAVE TAUGHT OR PROVIDED SERVICES FOR A PRE-KINDERGARTEN OR KINDERGARTEN STUDENT IN THE LAST 2 YEARS.**

Thanks,

Traci Smith

BE SURE TO CLICK TO THE SECOND PAGE AT THE BOTTOM.

Click the link below:

**Follow this link to the Survey:** [\\${1://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser: [\\${1://SurveyURL}](#)

Follow the link to opt out of future emails: [\\${1://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)



## Appendix D IRB Approval Letter

**University Committee for the Protection  
of Human Subjects in Research  
University of New Orleans**

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*Campus Correspondence*

Principal Investigator: Linda Flynn-Wilson  
Co-Investigator: Traci N. Smith  
Date: April 10, 2012  
Protocol Title: "Teachers' Perceptions of the Efficacy of Standards-based IEP Goals"  
IRB#: 02Apr12

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are exempt from federal regulations under 45 CFR 46.101 category 2, due to the fact that the information obtained is not recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Exempt protocols do not have an expiration date; however, if there are any changes made to this protocol that may cause it to be no longer exempt from CFR 46, the IRB requires another standard application from the investigator(s) which should provide the same information that is in this application with changes that may have changed the exempt status.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project.  
Sincerely,



Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair  
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

## **Vita**

The author was born in New Orleans Louisiana. She received her first Bachelor's degree in psychology from the University Of New Orleans. In 2000, she obtained her second Bachelor's degree in communications studies from Loyola University New Orleans and graduated magna cum laude. A year later, her Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in early childhood education was earned from the University of New Orleans. Her decision to pursue a PhD originated while working at the University of New Orleans on a grant. She finished her degree requirements in fewer than four years while working full time.