

Abstract

For students receiving special education and related services, the Individualized Education Program (IEP) should include a summary of the student's current skills and needs as well as annual goals that will support their progress in the general education curriculum; however, recent research has documented that IEPs for students with complex support needs may be missing required information. We investigated the IEP goals and Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) statements for 112 students with complex support needs in four different educational placements to understand (a) the similarities and differences in the literacy skills identified in IEP goals for students in different placements, (b) the extent to which students' IEP goals aligned with the literacy skills identified in their PLAAFPs, and (c) how this alignment differed across placements. The results of this study revealed some students were missing literacy-focused content in their IEP, very few K-2 students had goals focused on early literacy skills, few students in grades 3-6 had expressive writing goals, and IEP goals were inconsistently aligned with PLAAFP statements. Implications for research and practice are presented with a focus on improving supports and comprehensive literacy instruction for students with complex support needs.

Keywords: literacy, IEPs, educational placement, reading, writing

Analysis of Literacy Content in IEPs of Students with Complex Support Needs

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) guarantees students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) that is individualized to their needs. However, the educational placements and supports provided for students with complex support needs frequently run counter to the policies set forth in the IDEA, given students with complex support needs are frequently placed in separate special education classrooms and schools without appropriate learning supports and individualized instruction (Kurth et al., 2016; Morningstar et al., 2017; Zagona et al., 2022). Students with complex support needs usually receive special education services under the categories of intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, or autism spectrum disorder, take the alternate assessment, and require supports across multiple domains (e.g., communication, academics, social skills, health, behavior).

Students with Complex Support Needs and Literacy Instruction

Students with complex support needs require individualized supports to make progress in academic content areas; one content area that is especially important for this population of students is literacy (Copeland & Keefe, 2018). Literacy skills are used for communication, accessing all other content areas, and connecting with others (Keefe & Copeland, 2011; Copeland & Keefe, 2019). Literacy is also a human right: All students are able to acquire skills in literacy, including students with complex support needs (Browder et al., 2006; Keefe & Copeland, 2011). Despite the importance of literacy, extant research suggests students with complex support needs receive differential literacy instruction and support based on placement. Specifically, students with complex support needs who are taught in general education classrooms are more likely to receive literacy instruction (Ruppar et al., 2018) and achieve more

positive literacy outcomes (Gee et al., 2020; Mansouri et al., 2022).

In all educational placements, students with complex support needs require supports to acquire literacy skills (Afacan et al., 2018). Literacy has historically been conceptualized as a set of specific developmental skills in which some skills serve as prerequisites for others. This outdated “readiness” approach to literacy instruction might unnecessarily limit the range of literacy skills taught to students with complex support needs (Afacan et al., 2018; Copeland & Keefe, 2018; Kliewer et al., 2004). For example, educators may focus on the student demonstrating basic skills in phonemic awareness or letter names before moving on to learning grade-aligned literacy skills such as comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and writing (Copeland & Keefe, 2018; Keefe & Copeland, 2011). In addition to limiting the range of skills taught, there is also great risk students with complex support needs are taught the same skill for multiple years (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010).

In an effort to move beyond the focus on basic, pre-requisite skills for students with complex support needs and antiquated views of the student’s perceived readiness for learning to read (Ruppar, 2017), Copeland and Keefe (2018, p. 14) describe “comprehensive literacy instruction” as an integrated approach to literacy instruction that encompasses phonological awareness, sight word recognition, phonics, fluency, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing, attitudes toward literacy, language, and early literacy. Copeland and Keefe (2018) advocate for students with complex support needs to receive instruction and supports on multiple skills in this comprehensive literacy instruction model to provide (a) an opportunity to learn different literacy skills and (b) the support needed to make progress in the general education curriculum.

The Common Core Standards provide an understanding of the literacy skills students

should acquire in each grade level. Common Core reading standards across elementary grade levels are focused on skill development to read literature and informational texts, as well as foundational reading skills. Reading standards for literature include reading comprehension such as asking and answering questions and retelling stories. Reading standards for informational texts include asking and answering questions and gathering meaning from pictures. Reading standards for foundational skills are typically taught in early grades (e.g., Kindergarten) and focus on *concepts of print* such as reading left to right, recognizing letters, and *phonological awareness* including rhyming words, producing individual sounds (phonemes), and substituting sounds. By second grade, reading standards include the application of grade-level phonological awareness to words to read accurately and fluently for comprehension. In grades 3-5, students should continue to develop reading skills as they decode and comprehend text they are reading (Common Core State Standards, 2010). Like reading, Elementary Common Core Writing standards are focused on writing skill development such as drawing, dictating, and writing to convey information or stories in early grades (e.g, kindergarten). Writing standards also increase in complexity as students progress into upper elementary grades, where the focus shifts to writing about their opinions and narratives based on fact or fiction (Common Core State Standards, 2010).

Although literacy is a human right (Keefe & Copeland, 2011) and students with complex support needs should receive the instruction needed to make progress in all literacy skills, educators' low expectations and potential lack of experience may contribute to literacy being deprioritized or not addressed at all (Ruppar, 2017). Given the model for comprehensive literacy instruction set forth by Copeland and Keefe (2018), there is a need to better understand the extent to which literacy is integrated into instruction for students with complex support needs. A

lack of instruction on grade-level literacy skills for students with complex support needs may reflect low expectations or incorrect assumptions that a developmental approach to literacy is appropriate (Ruppar et al., 2018). Because the Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a proxy for instruction (Wehmeyer et al., 2001), one way to learn about the literacy instruction provided to students with complex support needs is to examine their IEPs.

Individualized Education Programs

According to the IDEA, the IEP should outline the special education services students with disabilities receive, including the “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (IDEA, 2004). An IEP is a written document for a student with a disability that is developed by the student’s educational team (e.g. the student, parents, general educator, special educator, related service providers) and consists of six major components (i.e., present levels, measurable goals, a description of how progress will be measured, the related services and supplementary aids and services the student will receive, the placement where students will receive their special education and related services). The first two components (present levels and goals) are the focus of this study, given their importance for creating an educational plan for school-age students with disabilities as discussed next.

The statement of the student’s present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) should include information about how the student’s disability affects their involvement in the general education curriculum (IDEA, 2004). The PLAAFP should also clearly state the student’s current skills and needs with consideration given to how those needs relate to grade-level standards aligned with the general education curriculum. Finally, the PLAAFP should include baseline data so that the team knows exactly what the student can do and can systematically plan their educational program (Ruppar & Kurth, 2023).

The measurable annual goals in an IEP are designed to “meet the child’s needs that result from the child’s disability, to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum” (IDEA, 2004). The student’s educational team develops personalized IEP goals based on the student needs identified in the PLAAFP statement and guided by the grade-level content standards aligned with the general education curriculum. In other words, the PLAAFP forecasts IEP goals; alignment between the PLAAFP and goals are needed to avoid substantive violations of IDEA and ensure all student literacy needs are addressed (Yell et al., 2016). Both the PLAAFP and goals outline student expectations; the PLAAFP describes what skills the IEP team deemed necessary to assess and report, whereas goals reflect the skills IEP team members believe are essential for students to learn (Ruppar & Kurth, 2023).

Individualized Education Programs and Students with Complex Support Needs

The IEP can provide useful information about what skills are prioritized and taught to students with disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2001). The development of personalized IEP goals can also lead to inequities in involvement in the general education curriculum for students in segregated educational placements (Kurth et al., 2021). In an analysis of IEPs for 88 students with complex support needs, Kurth and colleagues (2021) found that student goals differed based on their educational placement, with students in separate special education placements (< 40% in general education or separate school) more likely to have IEP goals that reflected a developmental approach to the curriculum and were not aligned to grade-level curriculum, as compared to similar students in inclusive or resource settings (>40% in general education) who had more grade-level academic goals (Kurth et al., 2021). Extant IEP analyses have, however, focused on all IEP content areas (Kurth et al., 2021; Kurth et al., 2022), with no known studies specifically focusing on literacy skills for this population of students. Further, no known studies

have examined how literacy IEP goals and PLAAFP statements vary by educational placement.

To better understand the integrated approach to comprehensive literacy instruction for students with complex support needs, an analysis of IEP PLAAFP statements and goals focused on literacy is needed. Given the purpose of IEPs is to plan for and ensure progress in the general education curriculum (IDEA, 2004) and the right of students with complex support needs to receive comprehensive literacy instruction (Copeland & Keefe, 2018; Toews & Kurth, 2019), there is a need to investigate the literacy-focused content of IEPs to understand content guiding the literacy instruction for students with complex support needs. The purpose of this study was to assess the integrated approach to literacy instruction for students with complex support needs in four different educational placements through the following research questions:

1. What similarities and differences exist in literacy skills included in IEP goals for students with complex support needs across different educational placements and grade levels?
2. To what extent do the literacy-focused IEP goals of students with complex support needs across four different educational placements align with the literacy skills identified in their statements of PLAAFP?

Method

The data for this descriptive study were drawn from a larger study that explored educational placements of students with complex support needs across the United States (Author, 2022). The current analysis was focused on the IEP data for 112 students with complex support needs. After obtaining IRB approval and permission from districts and parents, research teams in four regions of the United States (West, Midwest, Northeast, and South) visited schools in-person and recorded exactly the content of students' IEPs into an online database (Qualtrics).

Students whose IEPs were analyzed had educational placements noted in their IEPs that included: (a) Placement A (inclusion), defined as students with complex support needs were represented in natural proportions in their school and spent 80% or more of the school day in the general education classroom; (b) Placement B (resource), defined as students with complex support needs were represented disproportionately in a school setting and spent 40%-79% of the school day in the general education classroom; (c) Placement C (self-contained), defined as students with complex support needs were represented disproportionately in a school setting and spend less than 40% of the school day in the general education classroom; and (d) Placement D (separate school), where access to the general education classroom was not possible because no general education classrooms existed. Student demographic information is included in Table 1.

Data Coding

Literacy Skills Referenced in IEP Goals

All IEP goals were assigned preliminary categories by members of the research team as part of the first stage of data cleaning and preparation. Researchers assigned each goal to one of the following categories: reading, writing, mathematics, science, social studies, other academic, communication, social skills, sensory skills, self-determination, behavior, functional, recreation/leisure, employment/vocational, and motor skills. Goals that were assigned the category of reading, writing, and communication were selected for the present analysis given our interest in literacy. The preliminary category ‘reading’ was defined as skills associated with reading, including phonics, decoding, sight words, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. The preliminary category ‘writing’ was defined as skills associated with writing, including forming letters, writing words, composition, handwriting, and spelling. The preliminary category ‘communication’ was defined as skills in expressive and receptive communication, including the

use of aided and unaided communication devices, articulation of verbal speech, and/or pragmatics. For our purposes, only text-based applications of communication were included (e.g., responding to questions during language activities such as books; using words to describe pictures in a book or story). Goals that were originally categorized as being focused on communication were collapsed into reading and/or writing categories for analysis, given the content of these communication goals more closely aligning with these skills.

Next, the first author used existing literature to develop an initial codebook that included definitions of literacy skills that may be identified in students' IEP goals (available as a supplemental file). These literacy skills became 16 codes, and are included in Tables 2-4. Researchers then read each IEP goal in its entirety to determine which of the possible literacy skills, if any, the IEP goal addressed. For each skill, either a '1' was entered in a spreadsheet if it was addressed in the goal or a '0' was entered if the skill was not addressed in the goal.

Training and Inter-Rater Agreement. Our four-person research team completed two rounds of practice coding using IEP goals that were not part of the study data set; the first round of practice coding included 19 goals. Inter-rater agreement (IRA) was calculated between the first author and each co-author by dividing the number of agreements by the sum of agreements and disagreements multiplied by 100; first round IRA was 74.89%. All four members of the research team met to discuss disagreements, reach consensus, and clarify codes in the codebook. The second round of practice coding included 20 new IEP goals (IRA = 86.56%). The research team met again after the second round to discuss disagreements, reach consensus, and finalize the codebook.

Following practice coding, the lead author coded all study goals ($n = 283$), and the remaining research team members completed reliability coding. Each reliability coder was

assigned one of the preliminary domain categories (i.e., reading, writing, communication) to code. Reliability coding was completed in increments of 10-15 goals to ensure high levels of IRA throughout. After each increment, the first author and reliability coder would discuss disagreements and reach consensus. Inter-rater agreement was calculated using the same formula as in practice rounds; IRA coding was completed on (a) 35.09% of goals assigned to the reading category (IRA=98.84%), (b) 42.86% of goals assigned to the writing category (IRA=98.41%), and (c) 35% of goals assigned the communication category (IRA=99.72%).

PLAAFP Statement and IEP Goal Alignment Coding

Following the conclusion of IEP goal coding, the first author prepared a coding spreadsheet. Each row of the spreadsheet had one student's information, including columns listing their anonymized identification number, educational placement (i.e., Placement A-D), and grade level. A column that included each students' PLAAFP statement for reading, writing, and communication was also included. Next, a column for each literacy skill referenced in the student's IEP goal was added and the cell was shaded, indicating the student had an IEP goal that that specific skill area (e.g., phonological awareness, fluency).

Training and Inter-Rater Agreement. Next, the three co-authors completed practice coding of PLAAFP and IEP goal alignment using the PLAAFP statements and goals obtained from the IEPs of six students in the present study. The six students for whom we calculated this alignment had a total of 17 goals. Inter-rater agreement was again calculated using the same method. IRA for this practice coding was 82.35%. All four members of the research team met to discuss disagreements and revised the coding spreadsheet to include the definitions of the literacy skills in the spreadsheet. Finally, the first author coded PLAAFP statements and IEP goal alignment for all 112 participants, and other research team members coded 38.39% of the student

participants' PLAAFP and goal alignment ($n = 43$) for IRA. IRA was again calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the sum of agreements and disagreements multiplied by 100. Total IRA was 91.11%.

Data Analysis

To prepare for descriptive analysis, all IEP goals that were assigned categories of reading and writing, as well as applicable communication goals, were compiled into one spreadsheet. Goals were then organized according to the student's educational placement (Placement A-D) and grade level (K-2; 3-6) to calculate the frequency of goals focused on each literacy skill and to organize the goals by each student's educational placement and grade level. We grouped goals by grade levels of K-2 and 3-6 to mirror the increasing complexity of literacy skills as students advance through elementary grades (Common Core State Standards, 2010). We calculated the sum of students who were missing goals in literacy and the range of the number of goals per student in each educational placement.

We calculated the alignment of literacy skills identified in students' PLAAFP statements with literacy skills identified in students' IEP goals by summing each column of the spreadsheet used for alignment coding. All possible literacy skills had two columns in the spreadsheet with dichotomous scores (1 = yes, 0 = no). The first column summed whether an IEP goal was present in each skill category (e.g., phonological awareness) and the second column summed whether alignment was evident between the skill category identified in the goal and the students' PLAAFP statements. Thus, the total number of students who had a goal in each skill category (e.g., phonological awareness) and the total number of students who had alignment between goal and PLAAFP for each literacy skill category was determined.

Results

Literacy Skills Referenced in IEP Goals

Our first research question was: What similarities and differences exist in literacy skills included in IEP goals for students with complex support needs across different educational placements and grade levels? The first major finding was that the number of literacy goals per student ranged widely across the four educational placements: Placement A (range = 0 – 8), Placement B (range = 1 – 7), Placement C (range = 0 – 6), Placement D (range = 0 – 4). Across all placements, thirteen students (11.6%) did not have any IEP goals that included literacy skills. This included five in Placement A (14.3%; $n = 3$ in kindergarten; $n = 2$ in third grade), zero in Placement B, five in Placement C (17.2%; $n = 1$ in kindergarten; $n = 2$ in second grade; $n = 1$ in fourth grade; $n = 1$ in fifth grade), and three in Placement D (16.7%; $n = 2$ in fourth grade; $n = 1$ in sixth grade). In the following subsections, we report the literacy skills identified in IEP goals for students in grades K-2 and students in grades 3-6 as well as the ways they are similar or different across the four placements.

Goals for Students in Grades K-2

In this sample, a total of 45 students (41.11%) were in grades K-2 across placements. As shown in Table 2, students in Placement A had 41 goals, students in Placement B had 38 goals, students in Placement C had 20 goals, and students in Placement D had 4 goals.

Similarities Across Placements. Table 2 delineates the frequency and percentage of literacy-focused IEP goals for students in grades K-2. Across educational placements, few goals in grades K-2 included a focus on phonological awareness (Placement A: $n = 4$ (9.8%); Placement B: $n = 5$ (13.2%); Placement C: $n = 5$ (25%); Placement D: $n = 0$ (0%)). Only one goal across all students in grades K-2 was focused on beginning writing skills (i.e., trace marks in a tactile book from start to end; Placement C: $n = 1$; 5%). Other writing skills that were

infrequently included in IEP goals for K-2 students across educational placements were writing or typing words ($n = 1$, (2.4%) Placement A) and writing conventions (Placement A: $n = 2$ (4.9%); Placement B: $n = 1$ (2.6%); Placement C: $n = 1$ (5%); Placement D: $n = 0$). Across all four placements, skills associated with writing or stating students' own names were a frequent focus: Placement A: $n = 6$ (15%) goals, Placement B: $n = 4$ (11%) goals, Placement C: $n = 5$ (25%) goals, and Placement D: $n = 1$ (33%) goals.

Differences Across Placements. As evident in Table 2, when examining the literacy goals across educational placements, differences were evident in goals focused on comprehension, letter formation, writing letters, and writing and expressing ideas. First, only two goals (10%) for students in Placement C, and no goals for students in Placement D, were focused on comprehension. Comprehension was more commonly included in IEP goals for students in Placement A ($n = 6$; 14.6%) and Placement B ($n = 14$; 36.8%). Next, letter formation ($n = 5$; 12.2%) and writing letters ($n = 5$; 12.2%) were skills more commonly included in IEP goals for students in Placement A, as compared to Placements B, C, and D. Although there were 14 students in Placements C and D combined, there was only one goal focused on writing and expressing ideas (e.g., drawing, dictating, or writing using a pencil, typing, word bank cards to express ideas, write narratives). Although goals for writing and expressing ideas were more common in Placement A ($n = 5$; 12.2%) and Placement B ($n = 3$; 7.9%), these skills were only identified in nine (8.7%) of the 103 total goals for students in grades K-2.

Goals for Students in Grades 3-6

As shown in Table 3, there were similar numbers of students in grades 3-6 in each placement; however, there were differences in the total number of goals focused on a literacy skill in each placement: There were 54 literacy goals in Placement A, 57 literacy goals in

Placement B, 37 literacy goals in Placement C, and 29 literacy goals in Placement D (total goals in grades 3-6= 177). Although there were only three fewer students in the separate school placement, there were almost half as many IEP goals focused on literacy as compared to Placements A and B.

Similarities Across Placements. Across the four educational placements, there were very few goals focused on reading fluency: Only four of the 177 (2%) goals for students in grades 3-6 were focused on reading fluency. The literacy skill most frequently included in IEPs across educational placements was comprehension, accounting for 28.8% ($n= 51$) of goals for students in grades 3-6 (Placement A: $n= 20$ (37%); Placement B: $n=14$ (24.6%); Placement C: $n= 8$ (21.6%); Placement D: $n= 9$ (31%)).

Writing skills were infrequently included in IEP goals for students in grades 3-6. There were two goals focused on writing individual letters for students in grades 3-6 (Placement A: $n = 1$ (1.9%); Placement B: $n = 1$ (1.8%)). Further, there were very few goals focused on writing or typing words (Placement A: $n = 3$ (5.6%); Placement B: $n = 2$ (3.5%); Placement C: $n = 1$; 2.7%; Placement D: $n = 0$). Goals focused on conventions were also infrequent for students with complex support needs in this sample (Placement A: $n = 1$ (1.9%); Placement B: $n = 2$ (3.5%); Placement C: $n = 1$ (2.7%); Placement D: $n = 1$ (3.4%)). The writing skill most frequently included in IEP goals across placements was writing and expressing ideas (Placement A: $n = 8$ (14.8%); Placement B: $n = 9$ (15.8%); Placement C: $n =6$ (16.2%); Placement D: $n = 4$ (13.8%)). Although this skill was most frequently included in goals across placements, writing and expressing ideas was only included in 15.2% ($n = 27$) of goals for all students in grades 3-6.

Differences Across Placements. Although we found commonalities in the literacy skills included in IEP goals for students with complex support needs in grades 3-6, there were also

differences. There were five goals focused on sight words in Placement B (8.8%) and in Placement C (13.5%). There were zero goals focused on sight words in Placement D, and 3 goals (5.6%) in Placement A. Another difference evident in literacy skills included in IEP goals for students in grades 3-6 was in copying: there were four goals (7.4%) focused on copying for students in Placement A, and there were 9 goals (15.8%) focused on copying for students in Placement B. There were zero goals focused on copying for students in Placement C, and there was one goal focused on copying for students in Placement D. Copying was more frequently included in goals for students in grades 3-6 ($n = 14$) than for students in grades K-2 ($n = 3$).

Letter formation was included in goals across placements; however, this skill was more frequently included in goals for students in Placement A ($n = 5$; 9.3%) and Placement C ($n = 4$; 10.8%). One of the most obvious differences in the number of goals across placements was the literacy skill focused on the student's name (e.g., writing name, identifying name, copying name, writing name from a model or personal information from a model). Zero goals in Placement A were focused on the student's name, compared to four goals in Placement B (7%) and Placement C (10.8%), and eight goals in Placement D (27.6%). Goals focused on the student's name were the second most common skill in IEP goals for students in Placement D.

PLAAFP Statement and IEP Goal Alignment

Our second research question was: To what extent do the literacy-focused IEP goals of students with complex support needs in the four different educational placements align with the literacy skills included in their statements of PLAAFP? Table 4 delineates the proportion of goals aligned with PLAAFP statements (same skill mentioned in both the IEP goal and the PLAAFP statement) divided by the total number of goals focused on each specific literacy skill. With regard to reading skills, most students whose IEP goals contained a phonological awareness

skill also had PLAAFP statements that mentioned phonological awareness, and this was similar across placements (Placement A: $n = 8$ (100%); Placement B: $n = 6$ (100%); Placement C: $n = 4$ (66.7%); Placement D $n = 1$ (100%)). However, we identified a difference across placements in the alignment of PLAAFP statements and IEP goals focused on comprehension or vocabulary. Almost all goals in comprehension and vocabulary for students in Placement A also had PLAAFP statements that mentioned that skill ($n=16$; 88.9%). Slightly less alignment between goals and PLAAFP statements in comprehension and vocabulary was found for students in Placement D ($n = 6$; 75%). In contrast, only 60% ($n = 12$) of Placement B students and 44.4% ($n = 4$) of Placement C students had IEP goals that included a focus on comprehension or vocabulary also had PLAAFP statements that mentioned comprehension/ vocabulary.

Across all placements, there were low levels of alignment between writing skills included in student IEP goals and PLAAFP statements. In Placement A, the writing skill with the lowest alignment was writing letters: There were six students in Placement A who had goals focused on writing letters, but only one student had a PLAAFP statement that also mentioned this skill ($n= 1$; 16.7%). In Placement B, the writing skill that had the lowest alignment was writing and copying: Nine students had a goal focused on this skill, but only three students had PLAAFP statements that also mentioned this skill (33.3%). Across all placements, there was a lack of alignment between IEP goals that focused on writing and expressing ideas and mention of that same skill in the student's PLAAFP statement. Across the entire sample of 112 students, only 29 students (25.9%) had writing goals that included a focus on expressing ideas, and of those, only 15 (51.2%) were aligned with the student's PLAAFP statement. A greater level of alignment was evident for goals relating to the student's name (e.g., writing name, identifying name, copying name, writing name from a model).

Across the entire sample, twenty-six students (23.2%) had IEP goals that included a focus on their name, 73% ($n = 19$) of which also had PLAAFP statements that mentioned skills focused on their name. A lack of alignment between goals and PLAAFP statements was evident for students in separate schools: Only seven of the 18 students (41%) in separate schools had goals focused on any type of writing skill, and of those, only two students (28.6%) also had mention of that same skill in their PLAAFP. Finally, we found a number of students across placements did not have a PLAAFP statement in their IEP for literacy. One kindergarten student in Placement A (3%), one kindergarten student in Placement B (3%), six students (21%) in Placement C, and five students (29%) in Placement D all did not have any literacy content in their PLAAFP.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the literacy-focused content of IEPs to understand the content guiding literacy instruction for students with complex support needs across educational placements. There were several results of this study that are important to consider in the context of the purpose of special education and related services. First, some students in the sample did not have any literacy-related content in their PLAAFP, nor did they have any goals focused on literacy. There was also a wide range in the number of literacy goals each student had, a finding that is consistent with other analyses of IEPs (Kurth et al., 2022). The lack of literacy content in IEP PLAAFPs and goals and the wide range of literacy-focused goals for the students in this sample is particularly concerning given the level of individualized support these students require to access and make progress on the general education curriculum, including literacy. Further, the purpose of an IEP is to outline how the school will provide FAPE to the student. IEP goals should include the individualized skills that the student will be

supported to gain in the upcoming IEP year (IDEA, 2004; Ruppert & Kurth, 2023). The IDEA (2004) does not dictate the content of IEP goals but requires teams to identify the highest priority skills for students to learn in the PLAAFP and subsequent IEP goals. Given that our sample of students with complex support needs was in elementary grades when literacy skills are acquired for all students (Hougen & Smart, 2012), our finding that some students had no literacy PLAAFP statements and/or no literacy goals suggests literacy was not determined to be a significant enough need to rise to the level of being included in the IEP. This finding suggests that literacy was not identified as a priority for some students, which represents low expectations and inequity in educational supports and services for students with complex support needs.

The second major finding of this study involved the literacy skills included in students' IEP goals and a lack of representation of skills commonly addressed for that particular grade band of students in the Common Core Standards (i.e., K-2, 3-6). For example, less than half of K-2 students in each placement had an IEP goal focused on phonological awareness. Considering the focus on phonological awareness is the predominant focus of the Common Core standards and a skill that leads to reading fluency, comprehension, and engagement in other content areas as the student advances in school, this is a troubling result and suggests few students in this sample were being supported to learn skills that are addressed in the grade level curriculum.

A third concerning result of this study was the focus on copying and letter formation for students in grades 3-6. There were more goals focused on copying for students in grades 3-6 than there were for students in grades K-2. This finding is troubling given the focus and importance of writing as a way to convey information, share opinions, and write narratives in grades 3-6 (Common Core Standards, 2010). Overall, there was a low number of writing goals in Placements C and D, a finding that may be reflective of low expectations and developmental

philosophies held for students in these placements (Kurth et al., 2021).

A fourth major finding of this study was that students in grades 3-6 who were in more restrictive settings had IEP goals focused on their name, a finding that may also be reflective of a developmental approach to IEP goals (Kurth et al., 2021). No Placement A students in grades 3-6 had goals focused on their name; however, students in Placement B, C, and D did. This focus is not linked with the Common Core Standards (2010) and likely reflects low expectations as an age-inappropriate focus on “functional” skills rather than on skills that support students’ involvement and progress in the general curriculum which is the intended focus of special education and related services.

A fifth major finding of this study concerned the alignment between IEP goals and PLAAFP statements in writing. Across all placements, there was a low level of alignment between PLAAFP statements and IEP goals focused on writing. The most notable area of misalignment was in writing and expressing ideas (e.g., drawing dictating, or writing using a pencil, typing or word cards; writing narratives, or building sentences with word cards). This is especially concerning because our definition of writing included the possibility of adapted and modified approaches to writing (i.e., word cards, dictating, drawing responses). Writing and expressing ideas was only evident in the goals of 29 students in this sample; when it was in an IEP goal, only 51.7% of PLAAFP statements also mentioned that skill. This finding suggests the possibility that educators may not expect students with complex support needs to write to express ideas and suggests a lack of focus on writing skills in the PLAAFP. Misalignment within the IEP has been documented in other investigations of IEP alignment (Hott et al., 2021), and our findings suggest that more complex literacy skills (i.e., writing to express ideas) are less likely to be reflected in all parts of the IEP.

Limitations

Although we analyzed IEPs from a national sample, we only reviewed the IEPs of 112 students with complex support needs. There is a need for future analyses of IEPs to include a larger sample and also include more students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Additionally, research team members only reviewed IEP documents for this analysis; talking with members of the IEP teams who were present at the meetings may have provided more insight into the reasons for focusing on certain goal areas. We were also unable to determine the extent to which these IEP goals were taught to students; future research is needed to document how teachers address IEP goals in their lesson planning, instructional activities, and assessments. Further, across the sample, fewer students were represented in the more restrictive settings which is not representative of the distribution of students with complex support needs and their educational placement in reality (Morningstar et al., 2017). This study was initiated prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and due to school closures beginning in 2020, we were not able to collect a second IEP sample. A second IEP sample would have allowed us to understand the extent to which students met these goals and if or how literacy goals changed in subsequent IEPs. Finally, due to the relatively small sample size and uneven distributions across the placements, we did not determine statistical significance. Although we relied on descriptive statistics, we believe the results of this study provide new insights into the literacy-focused IEP content of students with complex support needs.

Directions for Future Research

Given the results of this study, there are several directions for future research to improve IEPs for students with complex support needs and to ensure necessary planning is occurring to support students to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum. First,

there is a need for future research to investigate teachers' views and skills in developing PLAAFP statements and goals that are aligned with the general education curriculum. The finding that some students did not have any goals or PLAAFP statements that focused on literacy skills suggests a need to understand whether teachers do not know how to use the general education curriculum as a foundation for writing these aspects of the IEP or whether they hold low expectations for the student. Previous investigations of teachers' views of literacy skills of students with complex support needs have suggested low expectations (Ruppar et al., 2017), but there is a need to investigate the perspectives of a larger number of teachers and their views in relation to the planning decisions they make in the IEP. This finding of a lack of PLAAFP statements and goals focused on literacy was more common in Placement C and D where these issues may be compounded by an overall lack of alignment (Ruppar et al., 2018) with the general education curriculum, but there is a need to explore these issues across placements.

A second direction for future research is to investigate the ways teachers make decisions about grade-level curricular content to include in IEPs and to develop a systematic process for teachers to follow to review the grade-level curriculum and assess their students. This type of information could be useful for addressing the lack of alignment between skills identified in IEP goals and the grade-level curriculum found in this study. This information could also be useful for ensuring baseline data are included in the PLAAFP statements. Although this study did not include an analysis of baseline data, an important direction for future research is to understand the types of data teachers include and the skills that are most likely to include specific data. For example, are teachers more likely to include baseline data on certain skills? Are they more likely to include baseline data using existing measures that have been adopted by the school district? What type of baseline data collected through informal assessments are included in PLAAFP

statements?

A third direction for future research is to investigate ways to increase the focus of IEPs on grade-aligned literacy skills for students with complex support needs. Previous directions for future research mentioned may address this; however, the results of this study suggest serious gaps in this area, and there is a need to consider all possible ways to address this issue. The results of this study suggest that core literacy skills (Common Core Standards, 2010; Hougen & Smart, 2012) were often omitted from IEP goals for students with complex support needs (e.g., phonological awareness, writing to express ideas or information, reading fluency, writing conventions). This finding suggests a lack of teacher knowledge or other resources to teach these skills to students with complex support needs, but future research is needed to understand this finding accurately. One way to investigate this is to understand how teacher preparation programs across the country prepare pre- and in-service teachers to teach literacy skills to students with complex support needs. Similarly, interviewing teachers to understand what knowledge or resources they draw upon for literacy assessments and instructional planning decisions would be useful. It is possible competing demands (e.g., teaching positive behavior) preclude literacy instruction from the teacher's point of view; and it is also possible teachers simply do not have the resources or time available to teach comprehensive literacy skills through adapting grade-level literacy curriculum. As several researchers have noted, literacy instruction should not be taught in a hierarchy, where pre-requisite skills are established before moving on to other skills (Copeland & Keefe, 2019; Keefe & Copeland, 2011; Toews & Kurth, 2019). Therefore, there is a need to understand how we can support teachers of students with complex support needs to hold strengths-based, grade-aligned expectations for students.

A fourth direction for future research is to investigate ways for the IEP team to

collaborate in developing the PLAAFP and goals in a way that integrates the feedback and expertise of all team members. For example, an occupational therapist can provide useful information about accessibility features to books and writing instruments, and a speech and language pathologist can provide insight into language development and how to teach skills such as phonemic awareness to students with complex communication needs. In partnership with a special educator's expertise in instructional and assessment strategies and a general educator's expertise in grade-level content instruction, a more integrated and aligned IEP can be developed. There is a need for investigation into the ways IEP team members can collaborate to uphold the intent and requirements of the IEP (IDEA, 2004) but that also provides ways for each team member to contribute. This type of process would be particularly useful for new teachers.

Implications for Practice

The results of this analysis suggest important implications for practice to ensure students with complex support needs receive the support they need to be involved and make progress in the general education literacy curriculum. Overall, there were concerning results evident in the skills included in IEP goals across educational placements, suggesting a broad need to ensure teachers are prepared and supported to lead the IEP team in developing goals that reflect high expectations and an intention to provide integrated, comprehensive literacy instruction (Copeland & Keefe, 2018). Given current teacher shortages and the potential for teachers to support students with complex support needs while simultaneously learning about this population of students, there is a need for professional development to ensure teachers have the support they need while they are developing IEP goals. This may involve mentoring for new teachers, but it may also involve leveraging online modules and structures for efficient professional development and coaching to ensure teachers can learn this content efficiently.

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Table 1*Student Demographics*

	Inclusion (<i>n</i> = 35)	Resource (<i>n</i> = 30)	Self- Contained (<i>n</i> = 29)	Separate School (<i>n</i> = 18)
Gender				
Male	18 (51.4%)	21 (51.4%)	15 (70.0%)	13 (51.7%)
Female	17 (48.6%)	9 (48.6%)	14 (30.0%)	5 (48.3%)
Grade level				
Kindergarten	7 (20.0%)	2 (6.7%)	3 (10.3%)	1 (5.6%)
First	7 (20.0%)	5 (16.7%)	5 (17.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Second	4 (11.4%)	3 (10.0%)	1 (3.4%)	2 (11.1%)
Third	6 (17.1%)	8 (26.7%)	5 (17.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Fourth	5 (14.3%)	3 (10.0%)	5 (17.2%)	6 (33.3%)
Fifth	4 (11.4%)	4 (13.3%)	6 (20.7%)	4 (22.2%)
Sixth	2 (5.7%)	4 (13.3%)	4 (13.8%)	5 (27.8%)
Category of Eligibility				
Intellectual Disability	9 (25.7%)	8 (26.7%)	13 (44.8%)	3 (16.7%)
Autism Spectrum Disorder	11 (31.4%)	8 (26.7%)	5 (17.2%)	6 (33.3%)
Multiple Disabilities	5 (14.3%)	8 (26.7%)	7 (24.1%)	7 (38.9%)
Other Health Impairment	6 (17.1%)	4 (13.3%)	1 (3.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Developmental Delay	4 (11.4%)	2 (6.7%)	3 (10.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Orthopedic Impairment	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.6%)
Traumatic Brain Injury	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.6%)
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	4 (11.42%)	3 (10%)	7 (24.14%)	1 (5.56%)
Not Hispanic	28 (80%)	25 (83.33%)	18 (62.07%)	12 (66.67%)
Missing	3 (8.6%)	2 (6.67%)	4 (13.79%)	5 (27.78%)
Race				
White	26 (74.3%)	23 (76.7%)	20 (69.0%)	13 (72.2%)
Black	3 (8.6%)	2 (6.7%)	2 (6.9%)	3 (16.7%)
Not Disclosed	2 (5.7%)	1 (3.3%)	5 (17.2%)	1 (5.6%)
Asian	1 (2.9%)	2 (6.7%)	1 (3.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Two or More Races	2 (5.7%)	2 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Native American	1 (2.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (5.6%)
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.4%)	0 (0.0%)

Table 2*Number and Percentage of Goals Focused on Specific Literacy Skills (Grades K- 2)*

	Placement A 41 goals <i>n</i> = 18	Placement B 38 goals <i>n</i> = 13	Placement C 20 goals <i>n</i> = 11	Placement D 4 goals <i>n</i> = 3
Reading				
Phonological Awareness	4 (9.8%)	5 (13.2%)	5 (25%)	0
Fluency	0	1 (2.6%)	0	1
Comprehension/ Vocabulary	6 (14.6%)	14 (36.8%)	2 (10%)	0
Sight Words	1 (2.4%)	4 (10.5%)	1 (5%)	0
Writing				0
Beginning Writing Skills	0	0	1 (5%)	0
Writing/ Tracing	2 (4.9%)	0	0	0
Writing/ Copying	0	2 (5.3%)	1 (5%)	0
Letter Formation	5 (12.2%)	1 (2.6%)	1 (5%)	0
Write Letters	5 (12.2%)	0	1 (5%)	0
Write or Type Words	1 (2.4%)	0	0	0
Writing/ Conventions	2 (4.9%)	1 (2.6%)	1 (5%)	0
Writing/ Expressing Ideas	5 (12.20%)	3 (7.9%)	0	1
Other				
Student Name	6 (14.6%)	4 (10.5%)	5 (25%)	1
Letter Identification, Names, Matching	2 (4.9%)	1 (2.6%)	2 (10%)	1
Early Literacy/ Print Awareness	0	1 (2.6%)	0	0
Multiple Skills	2 (4.9%)	1 (2.6%)	0	0

Note. Percentages were calculated using total number of goals for each placement. *n* sizes indicate the number of students per placement in grades K – 2.

Table 3*Number and Percentage of Goals Focused on Specific Literacy Skills (Grades 3-6)*

	Placement A 54 goals <i>n</i> = 17	Placement B 57 goals <i>n</i> = 17	Placement C 37 goals <i>n</i> = 18	Placement D 29 goals <i>n</i> = 15
Reading				
Phonological Awareness	5 (9.3%)	4 (7%)	3 (8%)	1 (3.4%)
Fluency	2 (3.7%)	0	2 (5.4%)	0
Comprehension/ Vocabulary	20 (37%)	14 (24.6%)	8 (21.6%)	9 (31%)
Sight Words	3 (5.6%)	5 (8.8%)	5 (13.5%)	0
Writing				
Beginning Writing Skills	1 (1.9%)	0	1 (2.7%)	0
Writing/ Tracing	0	0	0	0
Writing/ Copying	4 (7.4%)	9 (15.8%)	0	1 (3.4%)
Letter Formation	5 (9.3%)	2 (3.5%)	4 (10.8%)	1 (3.4%)
Write Letters	1 (1.9%)	1 (1.8%)	0	0
Write or Type Words	3 (5.6%)	2 (3.5%)	1 (2.7%)	0
Writing/ Conventions	1 (1.9%)	2 (3.5%)	1 (2.7%)	1 (3.4%)
Writing/ Expressing Ideas	8 (14.8%)	9 (15.8%)	6 (16.2%)	4 (13.8%)
Other				
Student Name	0	4 (7%)	4 (10.8%)	8 (27.6%)
Letter Identification, Names, Matching	1 (1.9%)	1 (1.8%)	2 (5.4%)	2 (6.9%)
Early Literacy/ Print Awareness	0	0	0	1 (3.4%)
Multiple Skills	0	4 (7%)	0	1 (3.4%)

Note. Percentages were calculated using total number of goals for each placement. *n* sizes indicate the number of students per placement in grades 3 - 6.

Table 4*Alignment of Literacy-Focused IEP Goals and Statements of PLAAFP*

	Number of Goals aligned with PLAAFP Statements/ Total Number of Goals			
	Placement A (n = 35)	Placement B (n = 30)	Placement C (n = 29)	Placement D (n = 18)
Reading				
Phonological Awareness	8/8 (100%)	6/6 (100%)	4/6 (66.7%)	1/1 (100%)
Fluency	1/2 (50%)	1/1 (100%)	0/2 (0%)	0/1 (0%)
Comprehension/ Vocabulary	16/18 (88.9%)	12/20 (60%)	4/9 (44.4%)	6/8 (75%)
Sight Word Reading	3/4 (75%)	8/10 (80%)	3/6 (50%)	-
Writing				
Beginning Writing Skills	0/1 (0%)	-	1/2 (50%)	-
Writing/ Tracing	1/2 (50%)	-	-	-
Writing/ Copying	2/3 (66.7%)	3/9 (33.3%)	0/1 (0%)	0/1 (0%)
Letter Formation	5/8 (62.5%)	3/3 (100%)	4/5 (80%)	0/1 (0%)
Write Letters	1/6 (16.7%)	1/1 (100%)	1/1 (100%)	-
Write or Type Words	1/3 (33.3%)	0/2 (0%)	1/1 (100%)	-
Writing/ Conventions	1/3 (33.3%)	2/2 (100%)	1/2 (50%)	1/1 (100%)
Writing/ Expressing Ideas	6/9 (66.7%)	5/9 (55.6%)	2/6 (33.3%)	2/5 (40%)
Other				
Student Name Letter Identification, Names, Matching	4/5 (80%)	5/8 (62.5%)	6/7 (85.7%)	4/6 (66.7%)
Early Literacy/ Print Awareness	3/3 (100%)	½ (50%)	2/4 (50%)	1/3 (33.3%)
Multiple Skills	-	1/1 (100%)	-	1/1 (100%)
Multiple Skills	0/1 (0%)	2/5 (40%)	1/3 (33.3%)	0/1 (0%)

Note. Alignment of PLAAFP statements and IEP goals was documented at the student level. Some students may have had multiple goals in one skill area; therefore, the data will not sum to the same numbers in Tables 2 and 3.