

In education, while some of the buzzwords change, and concepts and needs shift, self-advocacy always remains *au courant*. In November 2001, Jennifer Pieler Zickel and Ellen Arnold shared a strategy for putting the “I” in the IEP in *Educational Leadership*. It resonated with special educators at Sherwood Elementary School in Sandy Spring, Maryland and is a piece considered integral to the type of special education service delivery model constructed by the teachers at Sherwood. All special education teachers should read this article. The Sherwood team wants to share their experience about keeping the “I” in the IEP.

In these impending tough economic times we need to turn to the one most important resource we have in the classroom, the student...the learner...the one with the IEP. Typically special educators spend a lot of time creating and writing Individualized Education Plan's. After the annual review the documents are often filed away unreferenced until quarterly reports are due. The IEP affects a student's daily life and often he/she doesn't even know it exists. The IEP can teach students about their supplementary aids and services. It can teach them about their accommodations. Teachers can show students what their goals are and how the goals are based on areas of need. Knowing about their IEP's can help students understand themselves as learners, understand their disability, analyze learning situations that impact progress or comprehension, and develop useful strategies to compensate for their needs.

One teacher took the idea of the self-advocacy circle and decided how to apply it with the fourth and fifth graders at Sherwood ES. Similar to the process from the teachers at Montclair Elementary in Virginia the Self Advocacy Circle is a strategy taught to guide student thinking about the implementation and usefulness of their IEP's. The students are encouraged to ask themselves: *What do I already know? What do I need to know? And what tools or resources, do I need to know it.* These are the guiding questions explicitly taught in whole group instruction. It is reinforced in cooperative groupings, and reflected on in 1:1 conferences. Discussions about strengths and weaknesses become integral to the learning process in all these settings, and time is allowed for this. Students are encouraged to ask, “How do I use my strengths to support my needs?” Brainstorming for

learning strategies while applying them to possible solutions to the learning problem provides meaning to finding the right learner/strategy match to get the right answer. Brainstorming supports multiple representations and shows real life reasons and ways to solve problems. Integrating the “how” and the “what” of learning fosters good critical thinking. After explicit instruction on this kind of learning process, students can begin to discuss what prevents them from doing their best, ways to support their needs, and can plan for measurable, achievable goals. Extensive conversation, just talking, is a major part of this process. It is here students’ language can truly be assessed by a careful listener and sensitive guidance can be offered. As students’ understanding of themselves as learners emerges, their awareness of their own role in their learning awakens. Individualized plans are made, carried out, and then, together, they are discussed and evaluated to see if the plans are effective. Is it right? A good fit? Then on to step 2...or step 42, depending on the need, the learner, and the task. Sherwood implemented Zickel and Arnold’s Self-Advocacy Circle in a different way. The team felt the self-advocacy circle to be more of a spiral that peaks and valleys on a continuum. Checking in is not the last part of the circle, but a dipstick for understanding about that particular point on the plane of learning. The part of the Self Advocacy Circle that changes affects the teacher when the kids give feedback on how effective the instruction was, how teacher behavior supported their learning, and, once again, we talked about what can we do to get it right.

Putting the “I” in the IEP describes a self-advocacy circle that has four quadrants. The first quadrant is about explicit instruction on how to use the circle and learning what self-advocacy means. In the first quadrant students are learning about their **strengths and needs**. In the second quadrant students learn about **goal setting** and how **using their strengths** supports their needs. **Speaking up** is one quadrant, and **checking in** is the last part of the circle. Sherwood’s idea extends the *first quadrant*, which is more conceptual than literal. This is when the students are learning about the supplementary aids and services as they exist on their IEP’s. They learn about the accommodations on their IEP’s and how to determine if they need them and how to ask for them

in different kinds of settings. Teachers and students are learning about different individual learning styles and practicing them. Subjective data, surveys, and objective data, quiz scores, are collected to determine what strategy works for which student. The kids love talking about their learning styles to each other. For the struggling learner, good instruction can take hold with a learning style strategy threaded into it. Both the teacher and the student can use this combination of good instruction and learning strategies for reflection and evaluation. Error analysis becomes a less personal. Students can't just say, "I didn't get it." They will need to describe where in the learning strategy they met a stumbling block and/or where in instruction understanding slipped. This is a good activity for cooperative pairs. For example, some of them like soft music in the background while doing math, some need quiet. Some can watch a video and take notes about a story; others can only attend to the visual aspect of the lesson. How does this affect our classroom performance? How does it affect our grades? In the first quadrant we are learning how to learn the curriculum. How can the information be accommodated and managed so that it will become known to the student. The curriculum is a great tool to practice the "how" of learning. When students look at it in this manner it becomes less intimidating to them. They become willing to take a risk. They have learned they have tools and resources to support them. Teachers usually spend quite some time in the first quadrant of the self-advocacy circle. It often gets away from the curriculum, but those teachable moments are always so worth it. Teachers are creating a class climate that says it is alright to take a chance; a risk...as one 2nd grade teacher calls it a chance to earn a "bravery star."

The *second quadrant*, which overlaps with all others, is structured classroom discourse. It, too, must be explicitly taught. When working with students that have IEP's the idea of a non-specific language processing disorder, or a social/learning behavior impairment is no surprise. Do not forget about the executive function deficits that almost all students with IEP's have to some degree or another. Any one of these is the first impact to meaningful instruction and learning. The teachers have to take the students from where they already are at any point. They are talkers. Teach the students how to have a conversation about how to learn. Instruction on

how to evaluate data and turn it into useful information must be explicit. How to look at information and make a judgment is a skill students need to learn. How to look at the parts as it relates to the big picture and make a decision about what to do next is a critical reasoning skill. One teacher uses *Think Trix* symbols as a visual organizer to impart these concepts to struggling learners in whole group lessons and 1:1 conferences.

Quadrant three is the stage in which students can begin to make a plan for the learning. It supports drafting annual reviews and developing goals and objectives. Conferencing with students, sharing the IEP progress and obtaining specific input from the student about the next step, the tools, and the support needed to make the next year a successful one are important steps. While teachers share the actual IEP with the students, it is rewritten in kid-friendly language on “cool”, special paper. Highlighting important parts or copying it onto colored paper brings the document to life. Making notes on it and having students dictate the goals and supports they expect to see in the classroom next year has produced some interesting effects at Sherwood. Students and teachers discuss and make inquiries regarding exactly how an extended time accommodation should be used, what small group instruction versus small group testing means. For example, “how to I use my read-to accommodation?” The questions go on and on. Quadrant three of the self-advocacy circle gives the opportunity to provide clarity for everyone, check the rules and make sure we are fair. The planning phase of the self-advocacy circle is where action occurring is visible.

The *last quadrant* is for reflection. This is an extension from the teachers at Montclair Elementary School model. At this point everyone needs to reflect on this learning process. *Did it work? Did some of it, or all of it work? Was the instruction effective? Did learning occur? How did the time help or hinder us?* Look at the data – journals, notes, scores on class work and quizzes. Because of the time dedicated to the first step, we can evaluate and decide what worked and what needs tweaking or just abandoned. That’s how we move on to the next idea, project, and skill. This is a lot of intellectual fun. It’s messy, but good learning often is. This past spring the mother of one of the students shared in an email that her son told his tutor the most important

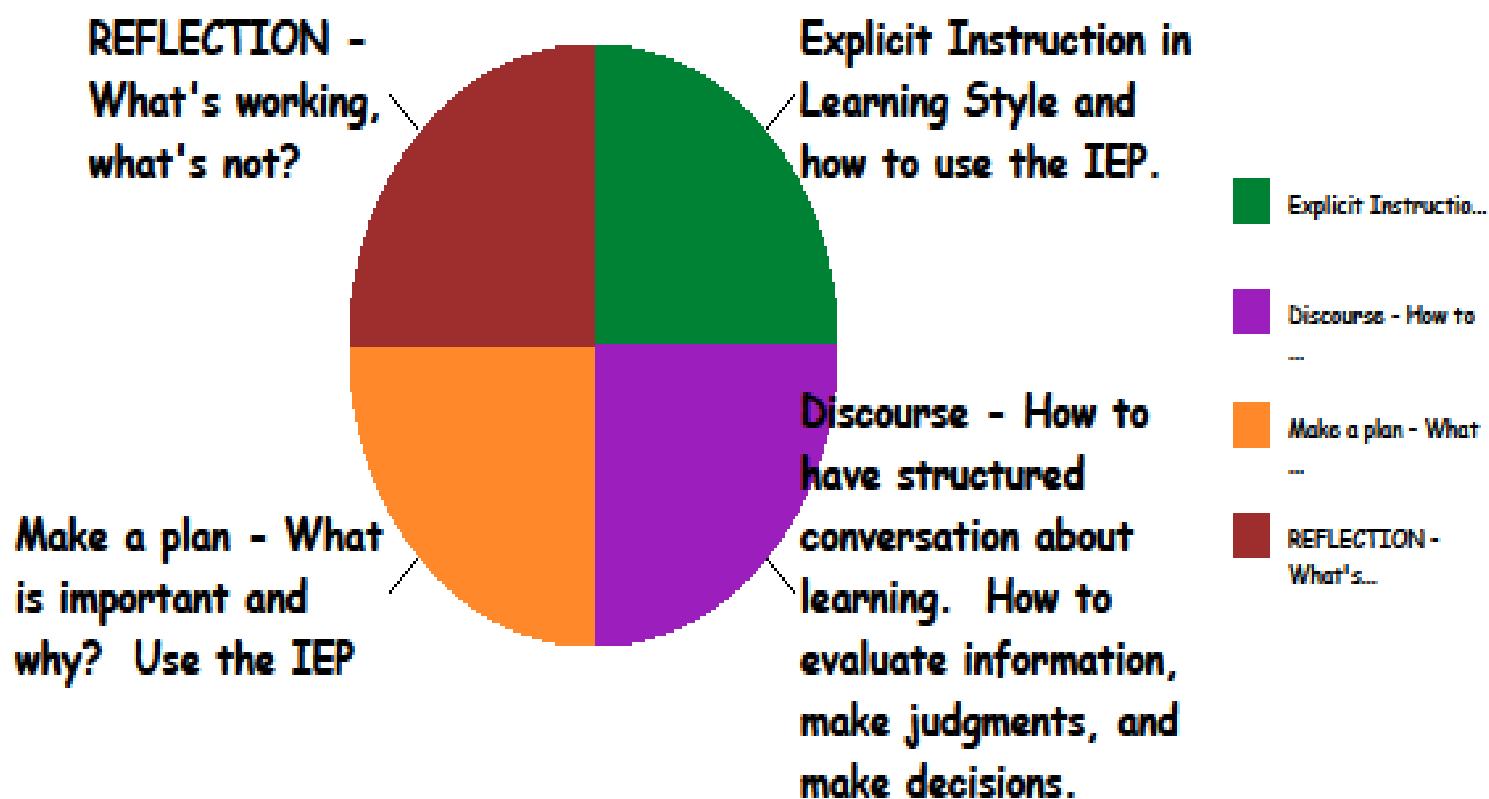
thing he learned this past year (in fourth grade) was that *he* was his best resource. He knew his job was to use his tools to help himself learn. And he sure did!

References

Lyman, Frank, (1988) *Think Trix*, Howard County Maryland, Howard County Public Schools Staff Development Center

Zickel, Jennifer Piehler & Arnold, Ellen (November, 2001) *Putting the I in the IEP*, EBSCO Publishing, Educational Leadership

The Sherwood Self Advocacy Circle



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