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Thesis Research

Emotional Appeals in Education
Pathos and the IEP

Introduction

Individualized educational plans are created to align teacher practices with student needs ensuring that the learning environment, in conjunction with methods used by educators, are creating a positive space allowing maximum potential for each student's success. This does not just mean academically. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be used to address academic, motor skill and/or speech delays that children may be experiencing, as well as, any issues they may be having socially and/or emotionally. Due to the nature of the documents and the wide span of various issues they may cover, they are highly time consuming to create, modify, and be agreed upon by all parties involved.

These sometimes lengthy documents are compiled by educators, therapists and counselors who have extensively worked with and/or observed the student in an educational setting. Parents and guardians are also encouraged to provide input and even if they have nothing to add or amend, must review and agree to terms set in place within the IEP or request accommodations/changes be addressed and revised before signing a re-drafted document. Accommodations agreed upon within an IEP cannot begin occurring within the educational learning environment without the document having been approved, and signed by the parent or guardian. This all seems so official: drafting documents, revisions, signatures confirming that an agreement has been reached. We're talking about little humans here, so where's the emotion behind it all?

In creating some heuristics that are emotionally charged, I will be using parent input as well as educational staff opinions to assess the role of emotion in two specific documents within educational communication. What sparked my interest to research such a topic is working in a therapeutic classroom where so much emphasis is put on the emotional status of the child. This brought me to question how we are addressing the emotional status of the parents. Are parents receiving the level of child-centered documentation they deserve? Or are IEPs following too much of a data-based system to fully benefit the whole student they address? Examining an official Massachusetts IEP form, as well as the IEP Process Guide using the ideals of Pathos as a model, commendations and recommendations will be made to ensure that IEPs appropriately and thoroughly address the emotional needs of parents, allowing them to feel confident that their student's needs are being met.

What is Pathos?

Pathos is an "old relic," part of a 3-way model of rhetorical theory: how to appropriately appeal to your audiences. With multiple views on the subject of emotional appeal, let's review the basics. The three parts of rhetorical theory focus on Ethos, Pathos, and Logos.

Ethos is a building up of the audiences' faith in the speaker/author. That is to say that they trust and believe what they are hearing or reading because they trust and believe the person who is telling them. This trust can manifest for many reasons: personal experiences related to the topic being discussed, exceptional education in the background, prior successes with similar material, etc.

Logos, is the appeal to logic, or rational thought. This means that the speaker/author strives to appeal to their audience in a logical way. The new things being said need to clearly and easily make sense, and also need to be easily assimilated into what the audience already thinks and believes. If there are patterns or links to follow, such as cause and effect, etc. using logos means that most people should have little to no issue adding the new information into existing knowledge and beliefs.

Pathos, what we are talking about in this evaluation, has been defined by some as an appeal to the emotions of your audience, where pathos comes from the word "passions." This shifts from ethos and logos as with pathos, a speaker or author is trying to develop and engage in an emotional connection with their audience(s) about a subject.

Following the mode of pathos in an argument means that in order to get anyone to believe your views, knowledge, or beliefs, you need to appeal to their emotional ties to said thing. Although successfully connecting to your audience may be positive for the speaker, that does not mean that the emotions evoked about any given topic have to be positive. This could mean many things: appealing to fear, pride, affection, patriotism, greed, etc.

Pathos is the powerful part of the rhetorical-argument-triad that stirs up the most conflict. Being emotionally driven, pathos creates a rift in the community of communicators as some believe that connecting to your audience through emotional appeals are, *ranging at the high end*: absolutely necessary to *ranging at the low end*: defective, immoral, or inappropriate.

For those who are pro-pathos, the argument is clear, if you can stimulate and arouse the proper emotions from your audience, they will move to action in the way you desire. Emotions are tied to decision making even in the most logical of cases: file your taxes because it's what you're required to do. Just because you are required by law to do something doesn't mean that you *will* do it. Many people still choose not to complete them for various reasons. You file your taxes because "required by law" means that if you

don't do it, there will be consequences. You don't want to experience those consequences, so out of **fear** of being investigated by the IRS or being forced to go to jail, you complete your taxes. In this case, the law has appealed to your sense of fear rather than your sense of public or civic duty.

For those who are anti-pathos, their argument is simple: what is needed to persuade people are the facts, and only the facts. This ethos / logos population believes that emotions are misleading, damaging, and irrational, therefore ruining one's ability to come to a well-informed and unbiased conclusion on any matter.

The Documents

Two evaluations will be completed to determine the effectiveness of the IEP in making appropriate emotional appeals. But before breaking down the IEP, we will look at the IEP Process Guide (IPG). The IPG is an in-depth, 30 page long document detailing the comprehensiveness of the IEP and the drive to improve student outcomes. In breaking down the reasons and research behind the effectiveness of the IEP, as well as highlighting all of the working parts that come together to assist the creation and implementation of one, the IPG is intended to take a lengthy and complicated process and simplify it while also supplying a complete checklist.

What is an IEP?

The Massachusetts Department of Education: Individual Education Program (IEP)

As mentioned above, an Individual Education Program is just that, individual. Any student who qualifies for an IEP under Massachusetts DOE credentials, has a 8+ page document drawn up on their behalf. Each section is completed and checked by educators and families to ensure all needs of the child are being/will be met as appropriated. Areas addressed are core subjects such as math, ELA, science, etc. Other areas addressed are social, such as the student's ability to share a workspace, communicate appropriately, or as simple as: acknowledgement of their classmates' physical presence or awareness of common social cues. Annual review meetings are held to see whether goals are being met, need to be amended, added, or removed due to a student's progress, regression, or state of stagnancy.

Who's more important? The tripod of the IEP

Educators

Educators involved in authoring an IEP are key players in the process as they are constantly developing new methods, modifications, and ways of practice that support students' ever evolving needs. Teachers, therapists, clinicians and nurses are all part of

the team of educators responsible for a student's successfully written and continued implementation of IEP. Each one of them has a unique role in the field, as well as a unique relationship with the student. These relationships are what drive educators to be genuinely invested in assuring that all students are reaching their highest potential, no matter how different that may look from student to student.

Also, having multiple staff who interact with the student in different ways maximizes the likelihood for the IEPs success. Students act and react differently to different stimuli in different environments with different people. Having various observations and fields of expertise all working together, provides a well rounded look at each student.

Working at a public elementary school, I have access to various educators in diverse roles. In speaking with several colleagues, I believe I've assembled a variety of perspectives regarding the IEP documents and how well they appropriately appeal to emotions or not.

Parents

According to the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE), parents are equal partners in the development of the student's individualized plan. As you would expect, parent input is just as important as field educators in knowing what their child needs. Parents may know what works in helping their child be successful, but may not know how to express that in a way that's appropriate/achievable in an educational setting and therefore, working with the child's educators, they can jointly develop a suitable modification or accommodation. Also, children behave/may struggle differently at home than at school and both parents and teachers are compulsory to an effective and successful plan by working together.

A parent's motivation in seeing their child be successful in school is completely tied to emotions. A parent loves and cares for their child and therefore is invested in their child's wellbeing and successes. Without emotional attachment to the child, there would be no concern for their highest potential to be achievable. .

Before signing off on their child's IEP, parents need to feel confident that their child's needs are being met, and I believe that feeling confident and comfortable with anything requires a level of emotional satisfaction and tranquility. If a parent is feeling uneasy, confused or overwhelmed, it can be just as detrimental as a parent who feels their voice is not being heard at all. Inevitably, the parent/guardian needs to feel 100% confident in signing their child's IEP. And confidence comes with a sense of feeling validated, supported and important, none of which can be achieved with merely "facts." With this in mind, it is imperative that parents use that emotion to drive them to be vigilant in advocating for their child so maximum potential can be achieved

The Students

To be fair, the students are the most important part of this equation and they have almost zero input into the document that is 100% relevant to their development. This does happen to be for their benefit, though, as most young children do not understand what things might ultimately be most helpful to them in the long run. The IEP is crafted with each individual student's needs in mind. This in turn means every IEP looks different. Though students do not dictate what their plans will consist of, in a way, their needs speak for themselves.

As students get older, they are welcomed to attend meetings, make suggestions, and take a more active role in developing their plans, which some more abled children choose to do, as they feel the desire to take charge of their own learning. Taking that sense of ownership is also fueled by emotions, as most people feel more confident in things that they were a part of, rather than things that are done for them.

The Methods

Many different aspects of these educational documents can be evaluated, but I've created a list that encompasses the emotional role that language plays in appealing to the needs of students and families. The literal goal of individualized educational plans for students is to maximize their ability to learn and retain information in an educational setting. But are these documents accessing the student in a caring way? Or are criteria-meeting students being addressed as data, diagnoses, and dollar signs? The intention of this created list of heuristics is to assess this legally binding document (Massachusetts DOE IEP) and see where it falls regarding emotional appeals.

Normally, heuristics for any document focus on design, content, organization and style. To be clear, some of those things will still be addressed here, as design and style can aid or hinder a reader/user, or in this case, a parent's ability to feel confident and comfortable with the document and plan for their child's success. If confusing jargon within the plan or misleading section headings are prevalent throughout, a parent might be quick to reject the entire thing, or because they don't fully understand what it is saying, may be too easily misled into accepting something that perhaps is not as cohesive and comprehensive as it needs to be to aid their child most effectively.

Subsequently, the IEP Process Guide (IPG) will also be examined by the use of a text cloud. A text cloud is a visual representation of numerical data. This method will be used to show the focus of the IPG in calculating what specific words are repeated the most throughout the document.

Rating Scale

So how are these documents being assessed? Each of the Heuristics is briefly explained and then a short summary of the findings for each document is noted. After a document has been fully assessed, a conclusion will be reached as to how the state department of special education is meeting their students' and families' needs.

Educators and parents will be interviewed as well. In looking at both documents, a series of questions will be asked to educators and parents to decide their level of comfort with each document. Documents will be scored and the results discussed.

In addition to the tables/visuals and summaries, recommendations if any, will be presented to give examples of how they could do better in the areas where they struggle to appropriately make emotional connections with parents and families.

The Findings

Table A (below) situates both documents against an emotionally charged heuristic. Since there is not a way to numerically scale what level a person may feel has been reached emotionally, responses are focused on emotional appeal and level of comfort. Visual A (next page) reveals the most repeated word throughout the IPG. Following that is Table B which shows the results of the educator and parent interviews.

Table A

Heuristics / Assessment topic	IEP Process Guide	IEP
Emotional connection: How does the document connect to the audience on an emotional level? What emotions are evoked in the document whether explicitly or illicitly? How does the document approach the student/student's needs on an emotional level?	The first section "Improving Student Outcomes" is about giving all students their best chance at academic achievement and growth. The use of vocabulary in this section is exceptional at evoking feelings of compassion, striving for excellence, fostering collaboration, etc. In overtly showing that parents and educators are working together to construct an	Little to no emotional connection to the students. All items and categories are listed and described clearly in a highly objective manner keeping the student's needs based on academic levels of success. This document is the "form" which accompanies the Process Guide, but is written in a completely different tone. The IEP, though

	appropriate document, a sense of unity and teamwork sets the tone for calming the parents' worries.	goals/success driven, also reads as being data driven, and therefore does not feel as "human" or that it's reaching out emotionally.
Easing tensions: Does the document anticipate reader/user questions and ease tensions? Does it meet the reader/user at their skill level? Does the document bridge any gaps that may exist between the material discussed and the reader/user?	This document is very thorough and comprehensive. With an in-depth breakdown of every step in the process of IEP from eligibility, acceptance into the program, assessment, document development, implementation, etc. Reading this document from beginning to end eases any anxieties one might have in completing this process for the first time. Near impossible to mis-interpret this document and its purpose. Everything is clearly written and explained.	Educators would not find any issue with this document as they would be versed in the material. Comprehension of the section and headings is straightforward for staff. Some parents may feel overwhelmed by some lengthy descriptions or headings. Parents of children with new diagnoses may not be familiar with IEPs and may have several questions or concerns that are not answered by this document.
Simple/direct language: Does the document use simple and direct language free of jargon? Are things fully explained/purposes outlined clearly? Is the reader/user able to follow the instructions and plans within the document without struggle or confusion?	Clear and direct language is present throughout this entire document. Not much jargon or difficult terminology is used. This should ease tensions of parents and staff as there is a reference point for every step of the process. This document succeeds at what it claims to be: an in-depth overview of all of the steps required to place a child on an IEP.	Educators would not find any issue with this document as they would be versed in the material, unless they were brand new to the field. Parents of children with new diagnoses may not be familiar with some of the terms and goals of the IEP. This document is not as thorough in describing different portions of the document as the Process Guide. This document is designed for those who are familiar with the process and

		may cause stress for those who don't.
White Space/layout/ organization/visual cues: is the document easy to follow from section to section? Does the document flow easily and in different directions without confusion? Is the layout visually calming/pleasing or is it messy, unorganized, or confusing and causing anxiety? Does the reader/user know where to find specific information easily?	Very clear layout. Straightforward/standard paragraphs with several small visuals scattered throughout. The main table of contents is very brief. Each section of the document is fairly long but headings and subheadings are very clear and easily scannable.	This document layout is very linear and some pages are visually "busy." This document asks for clear and descriptive answers and though every section of the document is expandable to any length needed, at first glance it appears very compact/squished. This gives off a feeling of the sections "closing in" or causing stress. This document does not have clear sections that denote special areas. Visual cues and foregrounding, is minimal.

Text Cloud

What is a text cloud

A text cloud is a visual representation of numerical data. In this instance, a full text was scanned for the frequency of certain words. How many times each word appears within the text is totaled and displayed.
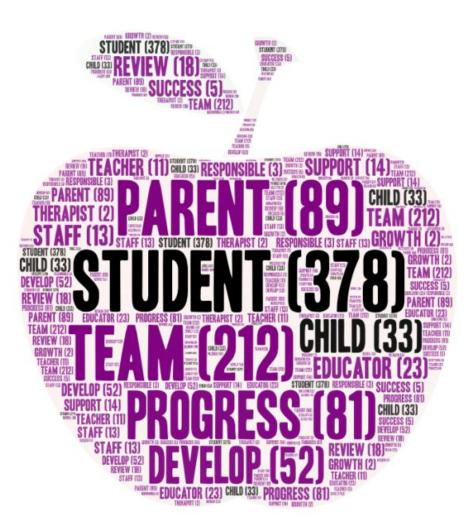
Further Exploration

Separately from these heuristics, I thought it might be interesting to look at word count throughout the IEP Process Guide (IPG) to see where the focus of the communication lies. As a parent, you're emotionally invested in your child's wellbeing and success. SImilarly motivated is the IEP itself. Finding the focus of the IPG through the use of a word cloud can give a straightforward visual of what or who is at the center of the communication.

Looking at Visual A, below, it is clear that the student is the primary focus, as they should be. Taking it a step further, one might note that out of this selection of words, STUDENT

appeared the most at 378 times and CHILD was mentioned 33 times. That brings the total over 400. The next closest is the word TEAM (referring to those who will work together to support said student) coming in at 212 times. Keep in mind that this document is 30 pages long. That means the student is referenced an average of 13 times per page.

Other words chosen to be represented in the text cloud are other words that may have emotional impact on the part of the parent. Words like progress, growth, develop (as part of developing/development, etc.) as well as support and success were also calculated in this visual.

Visual A

Interviews

To gauge the emotional reach of these communications, aside from compiling the table above, several educational staff as well as parents were interviewed about the individual documents. All responses will be paraphrased from interview materials.

It should be noted that both staff that were interviewed are familiar with being a working member of an IEP construction/modification team, as well have completely read through the IEP Process Guide.

Both parents interviewed have a child who is currently on an active IEP and may or may not have been familiar with the IEP Process Guide before this project. The parents interviewed for this project were given both documents to look over prior to the questioning.

The results and responses are listed below in Table B.

Table B

Question	Staff response summary	Parent response summary
How do you feel about the IEP Process Guide (IPG) and its approach to the complete IEP process?	The IPG was written to explain all of the steps involved in the IEP process and it really shows all of the pieces that need to be in place. The way it describes the process stresses that each child has individual needs and every case should be treated separately. From experience, it is not always as smooth as this document would have you think. Sometimes there are miscommunications, lack of participant contributions, arguments, etc.	From skimming through several sections it can be said that this guide attempts to show that the IEP process is well rounded and looks at children from multiple angles with their best interests at heart. ** It should be noted that both parents seemed comfortable with how their individual children's IEP cases were handled initially, and ongoing. Both children attend schools in the state of Massachusetts but in different districts.
Do you feel that the IPG successfully addresses the needs of the parents as well as the students?	Throughout the document it is clearly stated that the entire process of a student being placed on an IEP	The IPG seems to have a great tone to it throughout, showing that the focus really is to do whatever is

	involves both teachers and parents working together. Sometimes there are parents that don't want to be as involved or are limited themselves. This can be from a variety of reasons, but regardless, the parents should always feel welcomed to actively participate and advocate for their child.	needed for the child to succeed. After reading this, no parent should ever feel out of place or discouraged from engaging with the entire process of successfully placing their child on an IEP.
How do you feel about the IEP and how it reaches all areas of student development? How does this document calm nerves / create anxieties with its language and layout?	The Massachusetts IEP is written very objectively to cover all aspects of a child's learning environment and needs. Though the document is not filled with emotional language, the written responses from the team creating the Plan, can easily hint at this. Things can be written objectively and still show care and concern in a professional and appropriate way. This is still a legal document and needs to be clear.	Reading carefully through each section and seeing what is being done to meet your child's needs is very comforting. However, being such a long document it creates anxiety and can be overwhelming. IEPs appear to lack emotion in the language, but due to the robust content that is added to them, the child is brought to life inside of the document.

One parent remarked that he had never seen the IPG before. Normally, he confessed, would not want to read 30 pages of heavy text, but once he started skimming it, felt the need to go back and read the document in its entirety. Upon finishing, he claimed that what he read was extremely helpful. He did not forget to mention that he feels this way after reading it long after his child was having their first IEP written. He went on to say that if this had been presented to him right away, he would've felt completely overwhelmed.

The other parent interviewed said she had seen the Guide before from looking it up online herself after hearing that her child's teacher was recommending he "get tested." She said it was all she could do to Google everything on the planet about how well students fare on IEPs and how they (the DOE) knows who needs one or how to accommodate them.

As a parent there are so many things going through your mind when your child struggles with learning, and seeing how much actually goes into it from start to finish was comforting to both parents.. Obviously when your child goes through testing and you have multiple meetings to attend, it becomes overwhelming and you can lose sight of the fact that yes, you might feel overwhelmed, but these steps are in place to ensure that your child gets what they need. She inquired if there was a way to say all that in less than 30 pages, or if it could be set up as several separated readings to make it seem less daunting.

Recommendations/ Conclusion

Starting with the IEP, it's hard to say whether or not the document is successful or fails at creating an emotional connection by its language, because I don't think it even attempts to form one. This straightforward document is more facts based. The IEP surprised me in its language as absolutely none of it is emotionally driven. I assume the document's language is kept objective, due to it being a legal communication.

How an educator or parent decides to compose the responses to each section of the IEP will render it more or less emotional on a case-to-case basis. As stated by both educators and parents, though the IEP may lack emotional language in its existing text, once completed, it does show deeper emotional connections.

It makes sense that the document itself cannot be filled with emotionally charged questions as it is something to be read and interpreted by people who were not part of writing it. The purpose of the document is to bring to life, the student and their needs. Completing a form objectively seems the best way to discuss methods of teaching and accommodations, regardless of seeming as if the human aspect of the Plan is lost.

After reading the IEP Process Guide, which is riddled with words that poke at the emotions, it's hard to see that standing alone, the IEP does nothing of the sort. In looking at the IEP Process Guide, there isn't much to improve on as far as emotionally driven language.

The document does what it sets out to do: describes very thoroughly how to complete the IEP process from absolute start to finish. And I believe it does this in an appropriately emotional way very simply. By putting the emphasis on the child and laying out step-by-step how the district intends to aid that child, it immediately calms some fears and creates a sense of reliability, reaching the parents on an emotionally appropriate level. Everything about the IPG reinforces that a team of trained teachers, therapists, and other educators are devoted to making sure that children have what they need to be successful.

I suppose some areas could be shortened to save on time, but this document is something you will not need to read from beginning to end every single time an IEP is completed. This is a first timer comprehensive read, then a subsequent use 'quick reference guide' for later on.

One thing that this document could do to ease some tensions is a more itemized or detailed table of contents. A 30 page document that has only three sections and a summary, seems a bit daunting. It gets a little frustrating to search through a 7 page long section if you are looking for something specific. Each section of the text has between five and thirty sub-headings. It would make more sense to have all of the sub-headings listed in the table of contents for a more searchable and scannable text.

Bull in all, the IPG speaks about the student in an fitting emotional way. This document succeeds at a professionally appropriate level of appealing to emotions for its intended purpose by referencing the student's needs in a human way, a complete way.

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