



Improving Support Service Decision-Making: consumer feedback regarding updates to VISTA

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ABSTRACT This study provides data from 73 educational team members who used an updated version of the Vermont Interdependent Services Team Approach (VISTA) to assist them in planning educationally necessary support services for 11 students with multiple disabilities in general education classes. These data p

described. Second, updates to VISTA are presented which were designed to address its limitations. Third, the purpose and importance of the current study are presented.

Limitations of VISTA

The procedures included in VISTA called for all team members to be present at a meeting where the process was used to make support service decisions. Although team members acknowledged the value of this approach, they also recognised the practical limitations (Giangreco, Edelman et al., 1998). It was not feasible logistically, particularly for support service providers with large caseloads, to attend VISTA meetings for every student on their caseload. Second, in order to maintain fidelity of the process, several first-time facilitators of VISTA in previous studies required technical assistance from someone more experienced with the process to facilitate it with a team because one of the forms used during the VISTA meeting, called the VISTA Worksheet, was found to be challenging for some team members to use (Giangreco, Edelman et al., 1996a). Third, while the research data indicated that consumers found that VISTA improved their team decision-making, there were still concerns that the procedures in VISTA were not giving parents and general educators a strong enough voice in support service decision-making (Giangreco, Edelman et al., 1996b, 1998). Even though parents and general educators participated in VISTA meetings, concerns persisted that their involvement was not as substantial as that of the related service personnel. This was traced, in part, to the fact that during a VISTA meeting support service personnel offered their opinions first. Parents, teachers, and even other support personnel, who each had opportunities to respond, often deferred to specialists who were offering opinions or recommendations (Giangreco, Edelman et al., 1998). In follow-up interviews team members indicated that sometimes they had questions or reservations about what was being suggested, but felt uncomfortable questioning the recommendations of team members (Giangreco, Edelman et al., 1998; Giangreco, Whiteford et al., 1998). This deference to team members who were perceived to be specialists existed in part because some individuals sought to avoid conflicts, confrontations, or being perceived as challenging another team member's competence. These findings highlighted some important areas in need of improvement in VISTA.

Updates to VISTA

On the basis of the aforementioned studies, a Supplement to VISTA (Giangreco, 1996b) was developed to augment the information and procedures included in the VISTA manual in an effort to be responsive to consumer feedback regarding the need for improvements in VISTA. This section describes some of the m

using VISTA. The "To Do" lists include steps related to: (a) General Preparation, (b) Getting Ready for the VISTA Meeting, (c) Using the VISTA Worksheet at the VISTA Meeting, (d) Using the VISTA Team Summary at the VISTA Meeting, and (e) What's Next After the VISTA Meeting.

One significant change was establishing a core team versus full team approach to using VISTA. Minimally, the core team consists of the parents, classroom teacher, and special educator. Core teams may include others as determined to be individually appropriate such as the student, paraprofessional, or related service providers, who are building-based rather than itinerant. More typically, related service providers are designated as extended team members or situational resources to the core team. The core team approach to VISTA creates an option for core teams to get input from support service personnel without necessitating their presence at a VISTA meeting. This option results in fewer team members at the meeting, shorter meetings, proportionally more time for parents and teachers to have input, and puts more emphasis on understanding the support service needs of those who spend the most time with the student with disabilities, namely their classroom teachers and parents.

The core team approach is strongly consumer-driven where the consumers are the core team members. The updated VISTA "To Do" lists pertaining to General Preparation and Getting Ready for the VISTA Meeting include added emphasis on developing a shared framework among all team members as well as extending the knowledge and skills of team members to increase their capability to become more active and effective consumers of support services. The core team approach begins with the capabilities of parents and teachers to determine areas where assistance is needed beyond their own skills and knowledge, given that they are knowledgeable consumers about the potential contributions and involvement of support services.

Another major change in VISTA addressed consumer feedback by redesigning the VISTA Worksheet along with the corresponding procedures for facilitating the VISTA meeting (see Figure 1). The revised worksheet is simplified, reducing the need for technical assistance. Second, its procedures give classroom teachers and parents a greater voice in decision-making and decreases the likelihood of deferring to specialists. The revised VISTA Worksheet, presented horizontally on a page, includes a far left column that lists components of a student's individually determined educational program (e.g., priority learning outcomes, additional learning outcomes, general supports); this is similar to the earlier version. To the right of that

first column are the following:

The image shows a worksheet titled "Supplement VISTA Worksheet". The top section contains a header with three numbered items: 3. Provider?, 4., and 5. Below this is a large grid area. The grid has several columns and rows. The first column contains the text "NEEDED?". The second column contains the text "Y or N". The third column contains the text "START-UP SERVICE FOR DETAILS?". The grid is mostly empty, with some faint lines and text visible. The bottom of the page is a solid black bar.

FIG. 1. Supplement VISTA Worksheet.

and necessary support services. Data are sparse that establish the utility, impact, or development of educational and related service planning processes. Additionally, findings from previous and current research on VISTA demonstrate that limitations in planning processes such as VISTA can be identified and the processes incrementally improved through data-based consumer feedback.

Method

Research Sites

In the spring of 1996 and during the 1996±1997 school year, data were collected from personnel in 11 public school sites in three states (i.e., Massachusetts n = 3, Utah n = 5, Vermont n = 3) where students with disabilities who had multiple service needs were educated in general education classrooms. The students were included in

Supplement to VISTA. They chose between: (a) I thought the original version of VISTA was better than the updated version of VISTA; (b) I thought the original version and the updated version of VISTA were about the same; and (c) I thought the updated version of VISTA was better than the original version. All respondents were asked to rate the overall quality of VISTA as an approach to support service decision-making and planning given the options: (a) poor, (b) fair, (c) good, and (d) excellent.

Given a 10-point Likert-style scale where 1 was anchored with the phrase "Strongly Disagree" and 10 was anchored with the phrase "Strongly Agree," respondents were asked to circle the number that most accurately reflected their perspective for each of six statements based on their experience using VISTA. Respondents were also given the option to circle "Don't Know." The statements were: The updated version of VISTA: (a) provided significant opportunities for the classroom teacher to have substantive input into support service decisions and express his/her support needs; (b) provided significant opportunities for parents to have substantive input into support service d

TABLE I. Likert-style data on updated VISTA (total n = 73)

| Variable | n | M | SD |
|--|----|------|------|
| The Updated Version of VISTA: | | | |
| 1. Provided significant opportunities for special educators to have substantive input into support service decisions | 71 | 9.27 | 1.11 |
| 2. Provided significant opportunities for parents to have substantive input into support service decisions and express his/her support needs | 72 | 9.19 | 1.21 |
| 3. Provided significant opportunities for the classroom teacher to have substantive input into support service decisions and express his/her support needs | 64 | 9.11 | 1.38 |
| 4. Provided significant opportunities for related service providers to have substantive input into support service decisions | 71 | 8.76 | 1.55 |
| 5. Puts more decision authority in the hands of consumers (e.g., classroom teachers, parents) than earlier versions of VISTA | 42 | 9.07 | 1.22 |
| 6. Is practical. | 68 | 8.21 | 1.82 |

updated version of VISTA put more decision authority in the hands of consumers (e.g., classroom teachers, parents) than earlier versions of VISTA and their ratings indicated that they perceived VISTA as practical.

In their narrative responses, study participants described some of the attributes of the updated VISTA as being 'easy to read and understand,' 'shorter and more direct,' 'concise,' 'clear,' and 'organised.' One resp

used directly to inform and improve educational practices. By continually asking questions about the utility of planning processes and their "goodness of fit" with a set of guiding principles (e.g., family involvement, capacity-building) cont

processes so that consumers can have current information upon which to base decisions about potential adoption of processes. Equally as important, collection of evaluative data provide an important source of field-based information from consumers that can be used to advance our educational practices. Future research and development efforts should: (a) evaluate the impact of future updates to VISTA; (b) explore its use for other populations of people with disabilities where support service decision-making is critical, such as students with severe behavioural disabilities; and (c) explore adaptations to its use across the age-span and in nonschool settings, such as day care centers, places of employment, and community living options.

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