

The IEP Process: Current Practice and Perspectives

The study discussed in this article set out to explore the use of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) by teachers in schools for pupils with mild general learning disabilities. It sought to elicit teachers' attitudes towards the IEP and also to examine teacher preparedness for the IEP process, in light of the requirements of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSSEN Act 2004).

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INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the EPSSEN Act 2004 has now changed the landscape in special education, particularly in the area of individual planning. One of the main provisions of the Act states that a child with an assessed educational disability is to have a detailed and goals-driven education plan, which is to be reviewed regularly. Full

implementation of this legislation will require that an education plan be drawn up for all pupils attending schools for pupils with mild general learning disabilities. The EPSSEN Act 2004 does not use the term Individual Education Plan (IEP). It refers, however, to an Education Plan (EP); this is taken to mean the IEP as set out for the purposes of this article.

DEFINITION OF INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN

An IEP is a tool that helps teachers to plan and teach pupils with special educational needs. Nugent (2002) explains that the term IEP refers to both a product and a process. The product (document) serves two key purposes. Firstly, the IEP document communicates the targets to be met and the anticipated learning outcomes to all involved in its delivery. According to Tod, Castle and Blamires (1998), "the document triggers action" (p. 11). They also assert that "it is this action, which underpins the Individual Education Plan...the IEP acts as a summary document, which provides evidence and evaluates the additional provision that has been allocated to the individual pupil" (p. 11).

Nugent (2002) however, echoes points made by Tod et al. that the IEP is not solely about the production of a piece of paper. She explains that while IEPs can usefully be thought of as a product, there is also a process involved. She states that "in many ways it is the quality of this process that dictates the quality and efficacy of the IEP" (p. 99). For the purposes of this article, what constitutes an IEP is best summarised in Nugent's definition:

An individual education plan is a written document, which is prepared by teachers in

collaboration with others for a named student and specifies the learning goals which are to be achieved by the student over a specified period of time. Additionally, teaching strategies, resources and supports may be specified. The process of developing an IEP should involve collaboration with the pupils and parents. Each individual education plan should be monitored and reviewed. (p. 99)

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANNING IN THE US AND THE UK

The origins of the IEP can be traced back to the enactment by American Congress in November 1975 of Public Law 94-142 or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. One of the key elements underpinning the Act is that of placing pupils with disabilities in the least restrictive environment appropriate to their needs. This requirement essentially involves the placement and education of pupils with disabilities alongside pupils who do not have disabilities, to the maximum extent appropriate, in regular classrooms. To ensure that a student with a disability receives an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, the public agency must provide what is known as a continuum of alternative educational services.

In 1997 the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was updated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) (US Department of Education, 1997). This Act placed a new emphasis on the degree to which a student with disability is involved with the general curriculum, is integrating with non-disabled peers, and is working with a mainstream teacher.

In Britain, the IEP became a requirement for pupils with special educational needs via the framework of the 1994 Code of Practice (Department for Education, 1994). The 1994 Code of Practice has since been revised and replaced by the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice 2001.

“In the United States, the IDEA '97 requires that an IEP be written for each student with disabilities before special education services are provided” (Gibb and Dyches 2000, p.1). The situation is somewhat similar in the United Kingdom, where IEPs “became a requirement for pupils with special educational needs via the framework for the 1994 Code of Practice” (Tod 1999, p. 184). While there is an obvious danger that the process of producing IEP documents will only be carried out because teachers are obliged legally to do so, it is hoped that the student, who is at the centre of the IEP, will not be lost or indeed forgotten. (Nugent, 2002) writes that “where IEPs become instruments of accountability or legal requirements there is a very real risk that these functions will become the central *raison d'être* of the IEP” (p. 110). Care must be taken to ensure that this does not happen in Ireland.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANNING IN IRELAND

The enactment of the EPSEN Act 2004 is an attempt to address the area of individual

planning for pupils with special educational needs. One of the main provisions of the Act stipulates that a child with an assessed educational disability is to have a detailed and goals-driven education plan, which is to be reviewed regularly. Prior to the arrival of this Act there have been some informal efforts made to introduce IEP planning into the area of special education in Ireland.

The National Council for Curriculum Assessment (NCCA) produced a discussion paper (NCCA, 1999) relating to curriculum issues within special educational needs which stated that “the structure of the curriculum guidelines will include: the use of individualised education programmes...” (p. 26). Since then, the NCCA has developed curriculum guidelines (NCCA, 2002) for pupils with general learning disabilities. The use of the Individual Education Plan is advocated as being an effective way of planning for the individual educational needs of pupils with mild, moderate, severe and profound general learning disabilities.

EPSEN ACT 2004

The establishment in 2004 of the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in essence paved the way for the enactment of the EPSEN Act 2004. The Council is effectively the body charged with ensuring that the Act will be given full effect. The Act sets out a range of services which must be provided including, among others, individual education plans, referred to as Education Plans (EPs) in the Act. The main provisions of the Act relating to the EPs include the registering of each child with special educational needs with the NCSE.

Each registered child will have an EP prepared for him/her by the school, which the child is attending, or by the Council. The EP will set out the child’s educational needs plus the special education and related support services to be provided to him/her and the goals that the child is to achieve. There will also be provision made for regular review and amendment of the EP. Parents of children with special educational needs will be entitled by law to have a close involvement in decisions concerning their child's educational needs.

Whether the advent of mandatory Eps/IEPs will lead to an improvement in the quality of educational provision for pupils with mild general learning disabilities attending special schools remains to be seen. In providing for pupils with mild general learning disabilities, planning for the individual educational needs of the pupil will be of vital importance. The Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities (NCCA, 2002) state that “an individual education plan is an effective way of doing this” (p. 23).

CONTEXT OF THIS RESEARCH

The focus of this study was to elicit the views of teachers in schools for pupils with mild

general learning disabilities regarding the use of the IEP. There are thirty-one such schools in the Republic of Ireland and a sample of nineteen of these was selected for the purposes of this study. All four provinces were represented in the study by selection based on personal contacts known to the researcher, through involvement in The Irish Special Schools Sports Council. The sample of selected schools was chosen to be representative of urban and rural schools, junior and senior schools, large and small schools. A total of ninety-five questionnaires was distributed between the nineteen selected schools.

The Questionnaire

Section 1, entitled General Information, gathered information on the teachers and their classes and the pupils they taught. It requested data regarding the number of pupils in their classes, the age range of the pupils and the different educational programmes on offer to the pupils. It also sought to establish the existence of psychological reports, the nature of these reports and the teachers' use of these reports in the planning for the pupils in their classes.

Section 2, entitled The IEP Process, began with a definition of an IEP. This section sought to gather information regarding teachers' use of the IEP as a planning tool for their pupils. It sought to establish whether the schools have a formal policy in place regarding the implementation of IEPs and what guidelines are available and in use by those preparing IEPs. It aimed to explore the number of pupils for which teachers are writing IEPs in their classes. Significantly, it sought to establish the *raison d'être* for using the IEP, according to the teachers. It also sought to look at the levels of collaboration within the formulation, implementation and review stages of the IEP process. It looked at the time frame involved in the drawing up of an IEP and the notion of the IEP as a live document with regard to the review process. Finally, this section examined teachers' familiarity with the EPSEN Act 2004 and its requirements relating to the IEP.

Section 3, entitled Teachers' Attitudes Towards the IEP Process, consisted of a series of statements relating to the IEP process. Teachers were asked to read each statement and to tick the box that most accurately represents their view. These statements were ranked using the Likert Scale.

DISCUSSION

General Information

In all, 76 questionnaires were returned out of a total of 95, which represents an 80% response rate. All the teachers that responded were classroom teachers with responsibility for between 5 and 17 pupils in their classes. The Department of Education and Science pupil teacher ratio in schools for children with mild general learning disabilities is 11 to 1. The average number of pupils per class as per this particular study was 9.17 to 1. The most striking point to arise from this area of the study was that a large number of

respondents commented (unsolicited) on the fact that most of the psychological reports were out of date.

Regarding the content of the psychological reports, it is worth noting that only 52% of respondents felt that the psychological reports always or frequently include information regarding an individual pupil's educational requirements. This is interesting in so far as, prior to the requirements of the EPSEN Act 2004, these reports may be the only documents that teachers receive when a pupil transfers from a mainstream school to a special school for pupils with mild general learning disabilities. It would appear, however, that teachers do consult these reports when engaging in their planning and teaching, as over three quarters (76%) stated that they occasionally, frequently or always refer to the reports when planning and teaching.

The IEP Process

It is evident from the findings of this research, that there is large support for the IEP process among teachers in schools for pupils with mild general learning disabilities. Indeed, over three quarters (80%) of all teachers find the process useful and almost two thirds (64%) believe that it assists their teaching. Once again, almost two thirds (62%) of teachers believe that all pupils with mild general learning disabilities attending special schools should have an IEP. Teachers' reasons for using the IEP are outlined in the table below.

Reasons for Using IEPs

Ranking Reason
1 To meet the learning needs of the individual
2 To facilitate and focus planning
3 IEPs motivate pupils
4 Requirements of The Education for Persons With Special Educational Needs Act 2004
5 It is school policy
6 Requested by School Principal
7 Requested by Parents
8 Requested by School Inspector
9 Requested by Special Educational Needs Organiser
10 Other

The data suggests that almost all (94%) of pupils have had a psychological report written for them at some point, however most of these reports are out of date and there appears to be no facility to access full time psychological services for the pupils in many of these schools. Access to full time psychologists in these schools and the production of up-to-date reports on the pupils in question would ensure greater background knowledge for the teacher and should thereby lead to an improved IEP for the pupil concerned.

While almost two thirds (62%) of teachers are presently engaging in the IEP process at some point, it is worth noting that almost one third (31%) of teachers admit that they rarely or never write IEPs. This seems quite a high percentage considering the requirements of the EPSEN Act 2004. The question that must be asked is why are there so many teachers at present not writing IEPs? It is quite possible that many of the teachers that are not writing IEPs at present, are in fact unaware of the requirements of the EPSEN ACT 2004 relating to the IEP process. This may be evidenced by the fact that only just over half (53%) of teachers claim to be familiar with the section of the EPSEN

Act 2004 relating to the Education Plan. However, of those that were surveyed, almost two thirds (65%) believe that the full implementation of the EPSSEN Act will lead to an improvement in IEP planning in the future. It may also be the case that the large numbers of teachers not writing IEPs at present may be due to the fact that over half (57%) of schools do not as yet have in place any formal written policy regarding IEP planning. This is in spite of the fact that 60% of schools claim to have guidelines on IEP planning available within the school.

Of those schools writing IEPs, only one quarter (24%) believe them to be in line with the requirements of the EPSSEN Act 2004. Therein lies one of the major challenges facing the NCSE, the need to bring the EPSSEN Act 2004 to the attention of teachers and to familiarise them with the relevant sections of the Act relating to the Education Plan. This will probably have to be done by way of in-service training, incorporating implementation of the guidelines relating to the IEP process, currently being worked on by the Council.

Collaboration

Central to the IEP process is the concept of collaboration. The teachers in this study seem to have embraced this concept as evidenced by the fact that over three quarters (81%) believe that teachers should not devise IEPs on their own. The EPSSEN Act 2004 maintains that both parents and pupils (where appropriate) have a role to play in the IEP process. This research shows that teachers are engaging at present in the collaborative nature of the process. Almost half (49%) of respondents include the pupil in the formulation of the IEP, more than half (56%) include the parents, 59% include colleagues and 54% include special needs assistants in the process. These figures remain practically the same at the implementation stage of the process.

Reviewing IEPs

As Nugent (2002) outlined, the IEP can be seen as a document, but more importantly it can be viewed as a process. For this to take place, the IEP must be seen as being a 'live' working document. One of the key factors in the process is the review of the targets as set out in the IEP. In this regard, over three quarters (79%) of teachers surveyed engage in reviews of the IEPs. The collaborative element of the process is not neglected here, as evidenced by the fact that well over one third (40%) include other colleagues at this point, almost two thirds (63%) include parents, 43% include pupils and 40% include the special needs assistants in the review. These figures may seem somewhat low when compared with reported figures for the formulation and implementation stages of the process, but this may be attributed to the time factor involved. Indeed, well over three quarters (82%) of teachers believe that time is a restricting factor in the IEP process. It would seem that for the process to be successful, teachers will need to be provided with time to be available to attend the multi-disciplinary meetings to formulate and review the IEP process. This poses a huge logistical problem for special schools and is one that should not be underestimated.

Interestingly, once the IEP document has been produced, it would appear that many of the major stakeholders do not receive a copy of the finished document. Under one third of parents (30%) receive a copy, just 31% of other colleagues receive a copy and only 34% of special needs assistants receive a copy. Most surprising of all, however, is the fact that only 15% of pupils receive a copy of their own IEP. Surely the student could receive some form of the IEP in an attempt to enable him/her to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

In-service Training

As the data from this research shows, there is a large number of teachers (62%) engaging in the IEP process at present. Notwithstanding this, it would also appear that only 28% of these teachers have ever received any in-service training in the IEP process. There are only 4% of teachers who believe that they have received adequate in-service training in this area. It seems this is having a major impact on teachers' confidence levels with less than half (42%) of those surveyed stating that they feel confident in devising IEPs. Indeed, it appears that their willingness to participate in the process may be stifled as a result of a perceived lack of expertise in this area.

In light of the requirements of the EPSEN Act 2004 regarding the Education Plan, it seems vital that teachers in schools for pupils with mild general learning disabilities receive in-service training in the IEP process as a matter of urgency. This training should incorporate all elements of the IEP process and outline the legal requirements that the EPSEN Act 2004 will place on teachers, but also on all professionals involved in the IEP process. Perhaps the NCSE is best positioned to deliver this in-service training, as it has an expert group sitting on the IEP development committee at present. The Council is expected to issue schools with IEP guidelines soon but, as can be seen from this study, having guidelines will not be enough. As outlined earlier, over half the schools (57%) have no formal written policy despite the fact that 60% of schools have some form of IEP guidelines available.

Teachers' reluctance to participate in the process (38% not participating at present) may be attributed to this perceived lack of expertise, which could be overcome with appropriate in-service education in this area. It must also be pointed out at this stage that one of the key personnel to emerge as having a major role to play in the IEP process within the school is the special needs assistant. It would seem appropriate to include some form of in-service training for the special needs assistants regarding their role in the IEP process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings of this study the following recommendations are being made:

Provision of training in the IEP process for
whole school staff (to include principals and special needs assistants)

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relevant professionals (psychologists, speech therapists, etc.)
Special Educational Needs Organisers

Highlighting awareness of the IEP process among parents of pupils with special educational needs and also among pupils with special educational needs (teaching the pupils what an IEP is, how they could be involved, etc.)

Provision to be made within schools to facilitate teachers' attendance at multi-disciplinary IEP planning and review meetings

Provision of guidelines relating to the legal requirements of the EPSEN Act 2004 regarding IEP planning

Provision by the NCSE of templates for use and adaptation within schools for pupils with mild general learning disabilities

A review of the impact and benefits of the EPSEN Act 2004 on the IEP process to be completed within five years of full enactment of the legislation

CONCLUSION

The EPSEN Act 2004 is set to change the face of special education for the foreseeable future. The introduction of mandatory EPs/IEPs forms one of the major tenets of the Act. This research suggests that while teachers working in special schools with pupils assessed as having mild general learning disabilities are in favour of the IEP process being implemented for these pupils, they do, however, have some major concerns regarding the practicalities of the implementation of the process. This research has highlighted teachers' concerns regarding the levels of collaboration necessary with the multi-disciplinary teams, the time necessary to be available to participate in the process and the levels of adequate in-service training.

A review, within the next five years of the impact of the EPSEN Act 2004 on the IEP process would provide a valuable insight into the practicalities of the IEP process and whether the stakeholders view the process as worthwhile. As yet, there is no empirical evidence in Ireland to suggest that pupils with an IEP fare any better educationally than those without one. Research in this area may provide some valuable data regarding the merits of IEP planning for pupils with special educational needs. For now, teachers in schools for pupils with mild general learning disabilities seem to favour the introduction of the IEP on a more formal basis than heretofore. This must surely be seen as a good starting point in the process.

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