

Assessment and IEP Development for Young Children with Autism

The importance of precise, individualised planning for pupils on the autism spectrum cannot be overemphasised. Assessment procedures are necessarily different from the usual approaches due to the unique characteristics of children with autism.

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INTRODUCTION

Pedagogy can never be an inflexible system; needs will dictate means and some needs are truly special. (Powell & Jordan, 1991, p. 327)

This statement synopsis the essence of what this writer has learnt since moving from mainstream to special education. In working with pupils with severe to profound learning disability and those within that category with autism, the “specialness” of the needs is extremely pronounced. In particular, it is those pupils who are on the autistic spectrum who require both sensitivity and creativity in all aspects of the pedagogical process.

There are inherent challenges in choosing the most suitable assessment tools for the intended purpose coupled with the dilemmas of formulating “consensus” IEPs which accurately reflect the true needs of the pupil. It is the “truly special” needs arising out of the presence of autism, which influence practice most noticeably.

MEANS OF ASSESSMENT

Why assess?

In its strictest meaning, assessment may be defined as an evaluation of the merits of a person or an object (Collins Universal Dictionary, 1956). In the context of special

education, “merits” are what are regularly referred to as “strengths” or achievements so that what the pupil *can* do and *has* achieved is mapped. In fact, there are four main purposes for assessment in education, namely: formative (to describe a pupil’s current level of progress), diagnostic (to answer any “why?” questions), summative (to record achievements at the end of a programme) and evaluative (to judge and compare). Each of these arises periodically throughout the school year.

There are two main types of tests available for these purposes. Norm-referenced tests are used to compare pupils to others whereas criterion-referenced tests are used to match a pupil to a list of achievements. It is the writer’s experience that commercially produced tests are written in large steps. Teachers who work with pupils with severe to profound learning disability often write the micro-steps in between. Tilstone (1991) warns of the self-limiting nature of these items. No single assessment tool should dictate our teaching. Rather it should be “multi-factorial” involving many measures (Jordan, 2000). In the writer’s reception class, assessment is multi-factorial, though many of the measures will be refined in light of this research.

Assessment Methods used in Reception Class

The purpose of assessment at this stage is to establish a broad, comprehensive profile of the pupil, which subsequently will be instrumental in the compilation of the pupil’s initial IEP and indeed subsequent IEPs. Following is a brief description of the various types of assessment used in reception class:

- Prior to the entry of the pupil into the school, the teacher visits the pre-school on a day when the pupil is present. The pupil is observed in this setting and the key staff who have worked closely with the pupil will be informally interviewed;
- Parents visit the school; they willingly offer lots of information on their child and so a further informal interview ensues;
- Upon entry into school, a more formal profiling of the pupil begins. Further information is gleaned from such sources as psychological reports, other professional reports (e.g. speech and language therapist, occupational therapist or physiotherapist), parents' enrolment forms and the pre-school teachers' written reports;
- The pupil is then allowed to "settle in" to the new environment of the school.

Most establishments for children with autism are aware that the first few weeks in a new setting is not necessarily a good predictor of long term effects. (Jordan, 2000, p. 4)

During this time, the pupil, is continuously being observed by *all* staff (teacher, special needs assistants and members of the multi-disciplinary team) in a broad way initially;

- Observations are recorded daily on diary sheets under particular headings (e.g. behaviour, special interests, social skills, cognitive skills, physical skills, play skills) and in home-school communication notebooks. A variety of tasks are

presented in a variety of contexts in a trial and error format and the pupils' reactions noted. Checklists, hierarchies of skills and task analysis record sheets are used to plot the pupils' levels of competence in a variety of skills;

- More detailed assessment may constitute a functional analysis conducted in conjunction with the psychologist if a behavioural problem emerges. The speech and language therapist conducts a non-participant exercise in time-sampling on the intentional communicative attempts of the individual;
- The Psychoeducational Profiles – Revised (PEP-R) is administered to establish a baseline for the TEACCH programme;
- “Classroom staff-team” meetings are held.

After a two-three month period, all the information is collated into a baseline report in advance of the “introductory” IEP meeting.

THE TROUBLE WITH ASSESSMENT

The extent to which the presence of autism impinges on the choice and success of assessment tools is extensive. To appreciate this, one needs to reflect on the triad of impairments, which characterise autism (Wing, 1996). Wing outlines the fundamental difficulties experienced by the person on the autistic spectrum as: difficulties with social

interaction, difficulties with communication, difficulties with imagination and resistance to change. How do these impinge on the assessment process?

Communication Difficulties

The impairment in communication skills as evidenced in the population with which the writer works means that both oral and written language are not available as a medium through which assessment can be conducted. This poses a number of challenges because language is the usual route through which judgements are made (Powell & Jordan, 1991). Firstly, there is the risk of underestimating the pupils' ability. Powell & Jordan say that when children cannot express themselves either verbally or in written form, we might assume that they cannot know. Knowing is not dependent on language.

The writer has seen many instances where knowledge was present in the absence of conventional language. Secondly, in the absence of language, there is the challenge of finding alternative methods of assessment. It is primarily for this reason that so much of the evaluation of the pupils must be done through observation.

Social Interaction Difficulties

Observation methods are also useful when one considers the impairment of social interaction. The presence of others has been observed by the writer to be a major deterrent to performance by some pupils. In one instance, the severity of the problem was such that a pupil had to be placed with another class grouping. The vocalising of one child regularly caused stress and upset for one of the others. In the context of assessment, the presence of the tester can be overbearing for the pupil.

Methods which are indirect and unobtrusive often produce better results, the only difficulty being the time factor. Sufficient time has to be allowed for comprehensive observation. Cohen and Manion (1980) consider “participant observation” to be low yield, precisely because of the considerable investment of time that has to be made to collect relatively basic data. If we value these pupils, we will invest willingly in them. A two-three month interval is allowed in reception class for this procedure.

Generalisation Difficulties

A pupil on the autistic spectrum may be specific about where they do something (e.g. the pupil who butters his bread successfully in the kitchen and won't do it in the dining area). Results will not be generalisable if testing or observation is confined to one context. Jordan and Powell (1995, p. 154) state that:

...it is important to remember the contextual basis of much of the learning of individuals with autism and that behaviour that is present or absent in one setting gives no indication of its presence or absence in another.

To increase the breadth of the assessment process in reception class, all staff are involved in observation at some level, so as many contexts as possible will be noted (e.g. when a special needs assistant accompanies a pupil to the painting room or to the swimming pool, he/she will report on the pupil's performance). Often, it emerges that the need to teach the generalisation of a skill from one context to another becomes a priority goal in the IEP.

Scattered Developmental Patterns

A further difficulty peculiar to the assessment of pupils on the autistic spectrum is posed by the characteristic deviations from normal developmental patterns.

The patchiness of the profile of skills that is so common in autistic conditions makes it difficult to assess ability in any one area. (Wing, 1996, p. 131)

For a most pupils, a score on a psychometric test allows the tester to assume mastery of all preceding items but no such assumption can be made for pupils on the autistic continuum (Jordan & Powell, 1995). Tilstone (1991, p.162) outlines the considerable drawbacks in gathering data using these instruments:

They are quantitative assessment instruments and the score is the total number of successes gained. Similar total scores may be obtained as a result of very different types of performance.

A total score such as this gives no information for individual planning. Tilstone suggests that norm-referenced testing will become obsolete in assessment in special schools in the foreseeable future. The writer, however, does see the value of norm-referenced testing in the context of placement (initially, to inform the choice of an appropriate school setting and later to confirm that the placement remains suitable).

Prompts and Cues

The way in which the assessment is conducted can inform the teaching as much as the outcome. For instance, in assessing communication skills, it can be difficult to ascertain the level of understanding of language, which the pupil has because they respond appropriately to the words. It is important to observe if any visual or gestural cues are present (e.g. if a staff member is standing by an open dining-room door, wielding a spoon and the smells of dinner are filling the air, why wouldn't a pupil respond when asked to: "Come to lunch"?). Is it the actual words that are being responded to? From an assessment viewpoint, to set up verbal instructions in isolation from any other cues is a further challenge. It is in this context that the use of video is beneficial.

It saves the moment, to be studied from different perspectives later. The writer has decided that the use of video would enhance the assessment process in reception class.

Extraneous Factors

When working with pupils with autism, we need to be more aware of extraneous factors than with any other population. The pupil's mood or feeling of well-being will vary from day to day and may tarnish assessment results (Jordan, 2000). The pupil with autistic spectrum disorder is a very sensitive individual for whom many of our everyday stimuli (e.g. sounds, lights, smells and textures) are overbearing (Gillingham, 1995).

If it were possible, during the process of assessment, to bear all the factors of autism in mind and set up the most ideal assessment conditions, the results would probably be skewed too! What can be performed in ideal conditions often cannot be performed elsewhere. As already highlighted in this paper, generalisation skills cannot be assumed.

Which Assessment Tools Should Be Used?

Jordan & Powell (1995) stress that the best forms of assessment are observational assessments of functioning in everyday environments supplemented by structured interviews or checklists filled in by those with ongoing daily contact with the child in the natural environment.

The ethnographic method uses a qualitative assessment of naturalistic observations in which the interactions are as important as what the individual being assessed actually does. (p. 155)

The ethnographic method as this naturalistic observation is called is not about producing scores. It is about pedagogy. Jordan (2000) maintains that observation skills are undervalued.

Traditionally, researchers have used experimental studies. These tend to be artificial with non-transferrable results.

The Role of Parents

The involvement of parents is instrumental in effective assessment. Mesibov, Troxler, and Boswell (cited in Schloper & Mesibov, 1998) stress the value of parental input several times in their chapter on assessment. Parents have lived with their child for much longer than we have known the pupil. Parents have already observed much of what we are trying to find out. Not only do parents know the child best, they have a unique interest in their development (Jordan & Powell, 1995).

Self-assessment

The writer is aware of and endorses the value of self-assessment by the pupils but realises that implementing this strategy with pupils with severe to profound learning disability requires creativity. Some work has been done using photos of finished products.

To conclude, assessing the abilities of pupils with autistic spectrum disorder is difficult for a number of reasons. The characteristics of autism militate against the effective use of standardised tests and usual testing procedures: the lack of understanding of language eliminates the most obvious medium of assessment; the difficulties with social interaction thwart the success rate of tasks performed in a social context; results may be context-specific; the wide scatter of abilities leads to apparently inconsistent results; prompts and cues can interfere with outcomes and extraneous sensory factors may be at play. The ethnographic method of assessment

acknowledges all these factors. It is not focused on producing numerical scores, it is a tool used to learn not only about the pupils' levels of ability but also their strengths, needs, styles of learning (no matter how idiosyncratic they may be) and interaction with others. The ethnographic method is staff and family friendly in that all staff may be involved and parents' information is vital.

PREPARATION FOR AND DEVELOPMENT OF IEPs

In recent times in Ireland, IEPs (Individualised Education Plans) have become the fabric of special education. While there were always tailored plans of work for pupils with special needs, the formality of the IEP procedure has enhanced the quality of educational delivery. All pupils are exposed to the full breadth of the curriculum at an appropriate level but the IEP addresses those particular issues/goals which are specifically relevant to the individual. Decisions about priority goals are no longer the sole decision of the class teacher; they are arrived at by consensus at the IEP meeting.

Structure of the IEP

Arena (1978) suggested four stages to the IEP process, namely: development, implementation, review and revision. The Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) in the U.K. recommends a five stage model. At Stage 1 a child's needs are identified by the teacher; at Stage 2 an IEP is compiled to describe the child's learning difficulties and to set teaching targets; Stage 3 consists of review meetings and at Stages 4 and 5 statutory assessment occurs and a Statement of Special Educational Needs is written. While it is

not a legal requirement in Ireland, the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate recommend the IEP process as an effective means of addressing the special needs of pupils. It is apparent that a number of essential criteria apply to what constitutes an IEP internationally, namely:

- The IEP must contain a statement of the present level of educational attainment of the pupil
- The IEP must list specific educational services to be provided
- The IEP must contain appropriate aims and objectives for the individual pupil (to be written in a specific style)
- The IEP must have input from a variety of sources and personnel
- The IEP must involve parents

IEP Procedure

In the reception class, the initial stage of preparation and assessment has a two-three month duration. During this time, the opinions of classroom staff are gleaned at a series of staff meetings and the input of the relevant members of the multi-disciplinary team is sought. A date is set for the IEP meeting. Parents are notified and sent a blank “Strengths and Needs” form to fill in. At the meeting, attended by parents, class teacher, principal and relevant members of the multi-disciplinary team, certain roles are delineated (e.g. chairperson and minute-taker). The teacher presents a report on the results of the assessment arranged under curricular headings, behaviour and emotional development. A discussion ensues, from which priority goals/ targets are proposed. The agreed targets are recorded. These formulate the core of the IEP.

CONSIDERATIONS IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE IEPs

The Nature of Autism

Why must the education of pupils on the autistic spectrum be so individualised?

Freeman (1997) put it succinctly:

Autism is a heterogeneous disorder and presents in many forms. Therefore, what may be appropriate for one autistic child at a given time may not be appropriate for another child or for the same child at a different time. (p. 648)

Of all the disabilities, it is perhaps autism which presents the greatest diversity of forms.

There are no two pupils alike in terms of their educational requirements.

The Value and the Challenge of the Group

Arena (1978) maintains that “Input from all sources is critical” (p. 8). The group referred to constitutes all those who may attend an IEP meeting. Typically, it includes the parents, the teacher, the professional staff of the multi-disciplinary team and the principal. The group is valuable from a number of viewpoints. Each team member will bring his/her own perspective of the pupil’s strengths and needs, coloured by the priorities of his/her profession. Parents know the child out of the school context. The teacher knows what opportunities the classroom can provide. The multi-disciplinary team also acts as a resource, each having exclusive knowledge of his/her own discipline, thus informing problem-solving and providing support. Furthermore, Koegel and Koegel (1995) cite research findings, which propose that the presence of the group at the formulation of IEPs leads not only to better IEPs, but to better delivery of service subsequently. In order to

facilitate parents, they may be sent a copy of the teacher's report for their perusal prior to the meeting.

The Value and the Challenge of Parents

Parents are their children's primary educators. The Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) states that:

Children's progress will be diminished if their parents are not seen as partners in the educational process with unique knowledge and information to impart. (2.28)

Warin (1995) advises that parents need to feel included in their child's IEP. In some schools, negative attitudes towards parents pervade. Some staff may feel threatened by parents or some may harbour feelings of "professional superiority" (Koegel & Koegel, 1995, p.152). Mesibov et al (1998) considers the inclusion of the family to be of primary importance. In fact, his policies ensure that the needs of the family are always reflected in the goals of the IEP. As some IEP targets are usually expected to be addressed at home as well as in school, the team should be sensitive to the capabilities of the family. Koegel and Koegel (1995) suggest that:

One way to encourage parental potency is to focus on family strengths rather than weaknesses in the intervention. (p. 173)

Openness with parents regarding the content and methodology of programmes allows the parents to evaluate the pros and cons of each approach. As professionals we must be able to explain the *what* and the *why* of our work.

CHALLENGES OF THE IEP CONTENT

Jordan (1997) advises that the first essential step towards the formulation of the IEP is in careful profiling of the pupil, compiled with input from the multi-disciplinary team members. An accurate profile will describe the level of the pupil's ability in each curricular area. This will help alleviate the difficulty of writing the goals/objectives. It can be difficult to arrive at a consensus on what constitutes a priority for the pupil. Koegel and Koegel (1995) have found that a number of investigations have provided evidence that children's unique needs are not reflected in their specific IEP goals. There is a danger of limiting the goals to academic areas and not considering the social, emotional and behavioural needs of the pupil.

Where goals are written with a very narrow focus (i.e. each one a micro-step), the IEP could be considered to be overly reductionist. Goddard (2000), in his criticism of IEPs, fears that if we break down learning into tiny component parts, the whole will not be the sum of the parts. He fears that the whole child will be missed. From the writer's experience, IEPs are concerned with components of learning initially, but learning does not finish there. As previously stated, generalisation of skills to a range of contexts is often an IEP target. Neither can IEPs encompass the breadth of "incidental" opportunities for learning, which are availed of through exposure to a broad curriculum (e.g. during art, pottery, and music, much more is often learnt than the specific skills of that subject).

Parental expectations can sometimes be pitched too high or too low. The former is more often the case. While we must be sensitive to the position of parents (in terms of the level of their acceptance or understanding of the special need of their child), equally we must be aware of the level of readiness of the pupil to embark on a given goal. Wing (1996) warns that:

Pressing someone with an autistic disorder to attempt a task beyond their ability is a sure way of inducing inappropriate behaviour. (p.128)

She advises that parents and teachers must tread a fine line between too many demands and too few demands. This dilemma may be resolved by the use of effective assessment, which will illustrate exactly how the pupil is performing. Setting a time limit on a goal is also difficult especially for the pupil on the autistic spectrum. Autism causes deviations from sequences and the natural order of growth.

...children with autistic disorders typically have an unusual type of "learning curve". This means that, instead of making steady progress, however slow, they tend to learn something, then stick at this point for a long time-they reach a "plateau" in the jargon. (p. 130)

These pupils give no prior indication that this will happen, so at the time of writing the IEP, one cannot be faulted for not anticipating a "plateau". Also, with regard to the criteria for success of any goal, which are often written numerically (e.g. John will tie his shoelaces independently four out of five times), the nature of autism may intervene. John may tie his shoelaces correctly and independently one time and refuse to tie them ever again. For a pupil with autism, is this success or not? It is for reasons such as these that Arena (1978) highlights that the IEP is just a "plan" (i.e. it is not legally binding), which is open to modification and regular review, if necessary.

CONCLUSION

The needs of pupils on the autistic continuum are exceptional. Educators of pupils such as these, must be flexible in their approach to all aspects of the pedagogical process.

Effective assessment must achieve its purpose, be concise yet detailed and comprehensive. Ethnographic observations are autism-friendly and can be effective if the detail derived from same is managed properly. Ethnographic assessment can operate in the absence of language and need not be context-bound. However, one must be prepared to wait: ethnographic assessment is slow.

Effective assessment leads to effective IEPs. The key to determining suitable IEP content is in the assessment results. The IEP must “fit” the pupil. Some theorists believe it must also fit the family. According to Powell and Jordan (1991), assessment and planning are the tools of pedagogy through which it can be flexible, flexible enough to meet those truly special needs.