Teachers' Views of Working with Individual Education Plans in an Irish Special School

This article reports on the views of teachers in a special school on individual education plans (known as IEPs). It emerged that overall, the teachers found the IEP system useful and could identify key benefits as well as particular difficulties. The teachers' perspective of the utility of IEPs for parents and students was also examined. The research is grounded in the context of the Irish education system, and comparisons are made with the use of IEPs in other countries.

MARY NUGENT is an educational psychologist, presently working with the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). The work described above was undertaken when employed as senior educational psychologist within the Order of St John of God services.

INTRODUCTION

When we think about individual education planning in Irish special education, two things quickly become evident. Little is known about the uses of individual planning in Ireland and we differ from our English speaking neighbours on both sides of the Atlantic in that we are not, to date, constrained by legislative or statutory guidance. While we can always learn from good practice and positive experience abroad, it is important that we also learn from mistakes. How Irish teachers feel about working with IEPs is particularly important because there is not the same element of compulsion and therefore Irish teachers are working within a framework of choice. This allows us to exercise that choice to implement best practice. We need to harness the positive features of others' experiences and respond effectively to the difficulties if the use of IEPs for children with special educational needs is to be viewed by all parties as positive and worthwhile.

DEFINITION OF INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLAN (IEP)

At this point, it may be worth clarifying the definition of IEP since IEP can be differently described in different contexts. For example, the IEPs set out in Public Law 102-119 in the United States and those set out in the New Code of Practice 2000 in Britain, have their own specific definitions and parameters. Therefore, strict comparisons across systems are not possible. However, broad comparisons can usefully be made around recurring themes. For the purposes of this article, IEPs are defined thus:

> *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 student and parents. Each individual education plan should be monitored and reviewed.*

IEPs can usefully be thought of as a product. But there is also a process involved in developing IEPs and in many ways it is the quality of this process that dictates the quality and efficacy of the IEP.

THE EXPERIENCE OF IEPS IN BRITAIN AND USA

Since 1975 in the United States, Public Law 94-142 (updated in 1991 to become Public Law 102-119) enshrined the right of children to an individual education plan as a legal requirement. In Britain individual education plans are a requirement for all children with identified levels of

special educational need. This requirement was first established under the 1994 Code of Practice and more recently revised in the New Code of Practice 2000. Such legislation gives a status and significance to individual education plans that does not exist in Ireland.

In reviewing the literature based on the experiences of the USA and Britain, it is clear that individual education planning has not always been experienced as positive. There is much written about the difficulties with the process itself as well as criticism of the whole concept of individualised planning. Some key issues emerging from the literature will be discussed further. In summary IEPs are viewed as:

- a paperwork exercise
- not leading to effective interventions
- time consuming and burdensome for teachers
- ineffective
- poorly monitored and reviewed
- lacking in process inputs, especially collaboration
- lacking in student participation
- lacking in adequate parental involvement
- narrow and limiting
- not promoting inclusion or inclusive teaching
- requiring further teacher training

In both Britain and the USA there is considerable concern about how the demands of legislation and administration have caused the process of developing an IEP to become an empty paperwork obligation. It is argued that this paperwork does not lead to effective interventions for children, but constitutes a time-consuming and burdensome duty for teachers. Margolis and Truesdell (1987) reported that IEPs in New York City were seen mainly as legal documents that were not particularly helpful in educating children with special educational needs. In Britain, Hart (1998) argues, "individual assessment, planning, monitoring and review…consumes a vast amount of time, yet has only very limited impact on teaching and learning in the classroom" (p.76). Tod (1999) echoes this view that IEPs do not inform classroom practice, stating, "The written IEP is not always translated into practice - it thus becomes a cumbersome paperwork exercise which results in little educational benefit for the pupil" (p.184). Gross (2000) criticises an overemphasis on paperwork, describing "static documents" and queries whether it actually makes a difference to children. She argues, "report after report has highlighted the oppressive weight of administration and paperwork generated" (p.126). She suggests that the process of planning and reviewing IEPs "has degenerated into a paper exercise" (p.129).

A particular criticism of IEPs is that they are ineffective because they are inadequately reviewed and monitored. This was particularly true where schools felt under pressure to produce IEPs for inspection and accountability purposes. "Some schools were mechanically producing IEPs for the purposes of inspection, with no planned reviews and no mechanism for their subsequent maintenance" (Ofsted, 1999, p. 10). Dudley-Marling (1985) found that teachers referred to IEPs infrequently and found them inaccessible. Tod (1999) argues, "difficulties in the maintenance and monitoring of the IEPs are such that…their educational benefit is questionable" (p.184).

Additionally, some argue that IEPs are ineffective because they lack process inputs, especially in terms of collaboration, (McKellar, 1991). In particular the lack of student involvement in the planning, implementation and review of their IEPs is seen as a crucial lack of process (Peters, 1990; Salend, 1983). The Ofsted Report of 1999 acknowledges the extent of the difficulty in England and Wales stating, "The views of pupils are rarely sought in the preparation of IEPs or in the review process" (p7).

To a lesser extent parents are felt to be inadequately engaged (Gerber, Banbury & Miller, 1986; Vaughan, Bos, Harrell & Lasky, 1988; Vacc, Vallecorsa, Parker, Bonner, Lester, Richardson & Yates, 1985). Although commentators invariably support active parental engagement, parents are seen to be, at best, passive participants. For example, Goldstein (1993) suggests that IEP conferences are just formal meetings where parents are encouraged to sign already prepared IEPs. Crucially, there is concern that narrow, individualised IEPs limit experience and opportunity (Muncey & McGinty, 1998; Tod, 1999).

Additionally the focus on individual intervention is seen as moving away from promoting best practice in inclusive education. Hart (1998) criticises "individualised programmes of work (that) may separate and marginalise children from the work of the peer group" (p79). Pearson (2000) suggests that "there is a danger that the process may lock schools into a continual consideration of individual needs to the detriment of the development of whole school responses" (p146). Clearly this information is drawn on literature that explores the use of IEPs across a range of settings, primary and secondary mainstream schools as well as special schools. Some issues, such as the way in which IEPs may militate against inclusion, are perhaps more relevant to mainstream settings.

Finally, the lack of teacher training in developing IEPs is an issue. Margolis and Truesdell (1987) describe difficulties in teacher training and highlight the time demands, as do Dudley and Marling (1985) and Morgan and Rhode (1983). Tod (1999) goes as far as suggesting that learning support assistants get more training in the uses of IEPs.

THE PRESENT SITUATION IN IRELAND

Practice in relation to Individual Education Plans in special schools in Ireland has been emerging over time. In 1998 Fletcher reviewed a sample of special schools in the Dublin area, surveying a total of 67 teachers across eight different categories. She found that, of those responding, 74.6% had experience of preparing an individual education plan and 48% of respondents prepared an individual education plan for every child. In the discussion section Fletcher acknowledges that for reasons of methodology, these results may be an over-estimate of the incidence of special school teachers' involvement in preparing IEPs and should be treated with caution.

THE CONTEXT OF THIS RESEARCH

This research was based in a special school that caters for children with mild general learning disabilities. Students enrolled are in the age range eight to eighteen, with the bulk of the students joining the school at the end of the primary phase. Many of these students previously would have attended mainstream primary schools, usually within a special class setting. The school is unusual in a number of ways. At the senior end (ages 16-18), students spend half their day in school classrooms and the other half in vocational training facilities. There is a 5-day residential service available to those students who require a more holistic programme with social and leisure supports. Additionally, there is a support team on site, offering social work services, psychological services (including a post of educational psychologist), speech and language therapy and sessional psychiatry. It is acknowledged here that the existence of an educational psychology post attached to an individual school is highly unusual in Ireland.

The Individual Education Planning System

Individual education plans were introduced to the school in a structured and formal way in 1997. The implementation of this programme was supported by the school's Board of Management, the principal and the programme manager (who was also the senior educational psychologist). In the first year of implementation staff were given some collective training and this was followed by individual support in writing IEPs for their classes. The individual support

to each teacher usually consisted of one face-to-face meeting with the educational psychologist. This meeting usually lasted approximately 40 minutes, during which one or two IEPs were drafted collaboratively. At the beginning of the third year of working with IEPs, a further whole-staff, half-day training session was held, to develop practice. This training and support was planned, managed and delivered by the senior educational psychologist.

In the junior cycle (students aged 8-15 years) draft IEPs are presented at review meetings that are attended by the class teacher, principal, psychologist, social worker, speech and language therapist and other relevant staff (such as residential child care staff). In this situation the class teacher usually comes prepared with some draft targets which are added to and modified by the group. The review meeting is also an important opportunity to share information and plan a co-ordinated strategy for meeting needs. This process element of the IEP system is seen as very important.

In the senior cycle (students aged 16-18) there are far greater numbers of staff involved. Firstly, students tend to be taught by three or four different teachers, rather then just one individual. Secondly, as well as the staff mentioned above, the work experience co-ordinator, vocational instructors, sports and recreation co-ordinator and classroom assistants are also present. In some cases other specialists attend, as relevant, such as a sessional psychiatrist. In this context teachers (and other staff) are presenting individual targets that they will be implementing within their own subject area, and the whole group collaborate on devising targets which will be applied more generally, such as targets relating to attendance or social skills.

Student and Parental Involvement
Prior to the IEP planning meeting, students are generally reviewed by a psychologist and this is also an opportunity to seek the student's views about his/her progress and goals for the future. In the lower part of the school, after the planning meeting, students and their parents are invited to meet with the class teacher. At that time they are invited to contribute their ideas and comments and are also encouraged to think about how they could support the targets, both at home and in school. Once the contents of the IEP are agreed, all parties sign the document and parents are given their own copy to take home.

In the senior part of the school the procedure is slightly different. Parents are contacted, initially in writing and if necessary by phone and their views are sought and noted. These views are shared at the planning meeting and whenever possible are incorporated into the individual education plan. After the planning meeting, the student and parent are invited to a meeting. In this case the principal represents the school staff, while the Head of Vocational Training represents that department. At this meeting again all parties sign the IEP. Additionally, an individual tutor is assigned to co-ordinate the monitoring of the IEP and to facilitate review.

As can be seen from the above, there are actually two systems in place, each slightly different and modified according to the demands of the situation. The common threads are multi-disciplinary planning meetings, the preparation of a written individual plan and the sharing of that with students and parents.

METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2000 a trainee educational psychologist undertook a project in which she aimed to evaluate the efficacy of individual education plans in the school. There were many strands to this project, but a central piece of work was surveying all the staff to discover their views about the IEP system in place. The research reported here focuses solely on the teachers' views. The survey was sent via internal post to all the teachers, having being piloted with one individual.

Questions were designed to be open-ended and comments were encouraged. Therefore, the data collected was essentially qualitative in nature. Subsequently, information was analysed by arranging responses into clusters. There were no preconceived ideas about what clusters would emerge, but responses were grouped according to emerging themes. The clusters were validated by a psychology colleague double checking two out of the eight key questions and 87% correspondence was found.

RESULTS OF QUESTIONNAIRE

Sixteen teachers were surveyed and of these thirteen completed questionnaires, representing an 81% response rate. Most questions were answered fully and comments tended to be rich and detailed. The findings of the questionnaire will be presented in three sections. The first section deals with the functions of the IEP and to what extent it is experienced as useful and positive. The next section looks specifically at process issues of involving students and parents. Finally, the third section explores negative aspects of working with IEPs and considers changes and developments for the future.

Section 1. Utility, Functions and Benefits of IEPs

The most important finding related to the usefulness of IEPs. Teachers were asked, "Are IEPs useful to you?"

Are IEPs useful to you?

Yes	85%	11
No	0%	0
No Response	15%	2

Teachers were also asked to comment on how IEPs were useful to them and on the functions of IEPs. It was interesting to note the considerable overlap between these two categories. To avoid unnecessary repetition the results to both questions are reported here together.

How are IEPs useful to you? and What do you see as the function of IEPs?

Response	How are IEPs useful to you?	What do you see as the function of IEPs?
IEPs help planning and give a focus to teaching.	10 responses	13 responses
IEPs are a useful tool for monitoring individual progress.	4 responses	3 responses
It focuses on the child; it is individualised and personal	2 responses	7 responses

Additionally, when asked to identify positive aspects of the use of IEPS, teachers identified focus on the student, clarity regarding prioritising and setting attainable goals, practicality, and involvement of parents. Others' comments mentioned that IEPs are a tool for assessment and teaching, they look impressive and they contribute to the school plan. It is important to note that the multi-disciplinary approach with support for teachers was particularly valued.

Section 2. Involving Students and Parents

The next two questions aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of the views of the students and parents involved. In this way, the IEP is being viewed as a process and not just a product.

5

Overall, students were considered to derive a number of benefits from having IEPs and most teachers felt that students knew what was expected and were aware of a 'plan'. This in turn helped students to feel both ownership and a sense of personal value. However, three teachers felt students were not aware or not interested in their IEPs. Parents were seen to gain knowledge about goals, abilities, needs and potential. This appeared to have the effect of engaging parents and assuring them that their child was seen as an individual.

Section 3. Negative Aspects, Changes and Developments Needed

Teachers were encouraged to report on negative aspects of IEPs as well as to consider ways in which the IEP system could be changed and developed. Reservations expressed included concerns regarding monitoring and an opinion that yearly review was too infrequent. Other negative aspects identified included possible parent pressure on teachers, administration difficulties, workload and time difficulties, narrow "blinkered" focus, difficulties in gathering information and in setting accurate targets. There were also some concerns expressed that if goals are not reached it is upsetting, parents do not understand them, weak students do not respond well, students are not always involved and that IEPs are repetitive and not individual enough.

In reporting results, two questions were amalgamated because of the considerable overlap in the responses. Teachers were asked, "What would you change about the IEP system to make it more effective?" and "In what way would you like to see IEPs develop in this service?" Interestingly, although most questionnaires were completed in detail, four respondents chose not to answer either of these questions and a further two, noted that they would wish to change nothing in the present system. The two major themes emerging here were that IEPs need to be more carefully monitored and reviewed and that there needs to be changes in the organisation and administration of the IEP system. Teachers also expressed concern about how parents may put pressure on them and about the workload involved in preparing IEPs.

DISCUSSION

This section first considers how the experience of working with IEPs in this special school in Ireland is broadly experienced as positive, particularly when compared with international experience. Secondly, the areas of particular concern emerging from this research are aired. Finally, there is some consideration of system level issues.

Positive Experiences

Overwhelmingly, IEPs in this sample special school were seen positively. Teachers viewed them as helpful and could identify many positive aspects to IEPs. These Irish teachers did not share the reported finding from other countries that IEPs were perceived to be a paperwork exercise. Even when negative comments were specifically invited they were outnumbered by positive comments. Many respondents (six in total) representing almost half the sample did not have any suggestions for changes to the IEP system, which may suggest general satisfaction. As one teacher commented, "Overall I think that IEPs are a positive development at our school. I find it helpful."

In terms of effective interventions, teachers reported finding that IEPs helped them to plan their work and gave a focus to teaching. Teachers cited 'attainable goals' as an important feature of IEPs. In this way, it can be seen that the experience of using IEPs in this school did not support the negative findings of other countries where it was reported that IEPs did not lead to effective interventions.

IEPs were time-consuming for teachers, and four of the sample, some 30%, mentioned this as a negative aspect of IEPs. This is consistent with the experiences in Britain and the USA. However, this is balanced by the finding that 85% of the teachers found IEPs useful, while 15% did not respond explicitly to this question. The comments of this remaining 15% suggested

ambivalence rather than clear negativity, e.g. "I like the way the IEPs focus the goals for the child. I do not like the pressure it puts on teachers to deliver the goals."

Lack of process input, especially collaboration, was not expressed as a particular concern. These Irish teachers did not mention this as a difficulty, while eight respondents (60%) mentioned the positive impact of the multi-disciplinary team approach, e.g. "I feel more focussed and appreciate the involvement of others…"

In terms of process difficulties, a lack of student participation was mentioned just three times by two of the respondents. Teachers generally reported that IEPs were important to students for a variety of reasons, although three respondents did suggest that students were not aware of their IEPs. This is not to say that the level of student participation is objectively satisfactory. Certainly, the writings of Peters (1990), Gross (2000) and Pearson (2000) all contain many imaginative suggestions for promoting student participation, particularly in the area of monitoring of IEPs.

As to whether IEPs are narrow and limiting, only two teachers cited this as a difficulty. Neither elucidated this point further. Interestingly, none of the teachers mentioned the idea that IEPs by their very nature are in some ways moving us away from inclusive practice. This may reflect the context of a segregated special school, where there is already some acceptance of a separate educational setting for children.

Another difference between international research and the sample discussed here is that Irish teachers in this context did not see training for teachers as a key issue. The topic arose just once and referred to staff new to the school having access to training. This is most important in that it suggests that most teachers found the level of training that they received to be satisfactory. Again, the context of a special school may be very important here. Teachers were available to train in a group and shared a common agenda. The importance of the peer support in a setting where the entire staff is writing IEPs may also be very important and certainly this author was aware of the significance of informal support from teacher colleagues. This has important implications for other schools wishing to develop an IEP system. Group training, individual support and peer support all seem to have contributed to overall satisfaction and confidence in teachers.

Areas of Concern
The complaint that found the highest level of concordance with international research, was the finding that IEPs need to be reviewed and monitored more effectively. Some eleven respondents, (85% of the sample) expressed this concern e.g. "I feel IEPs are beneficial when they're used correctly but it can be easy to forget about them - they must be an active working document!" This is a case where suggestions based on the experiences of others may be useful. Certainly, the writings of Gross (2000) and Pearson (2000) have specific strategies which could be considered. Additionally, comments suggested concerns about the administration of the system, particularly everyday matters of chairing meetings and organising timing and cover. There is certainly a case for refining the systems in use. However, some of the concerns were contradictory. For example, one teacher felt IEP meetings were timetabled too early in the year, while another felt they were timetabled too late.

A particularly striking aspect of this research was the extent of teacher concerns about parental involvement. Views about parental participation provoked some passionately expressed ideas. One issue (represented by the comments of 39% of the sample) reflected concern that the IEP system gave parents more power and that some teachers feared being accountable to parents. One teacher expressed the view that teachers should not sign IEPs since they may be vulnerable to being sued. Some feared that parents might put too much pressure on teachers to achieve the goals set out. For example, one teacher wrote, "…We are in an extremely stressful job…setting up goals that may or may not be achievable…On top of that we give these goals to parents so

7

that they can monitor our achievements!" This level of anxiety about parental power is not found in other writings. It may reflect an Irish society that has become increasingly litigious. On the other hand it may also reflect a lack of dialogue and understanding between teachers and parents of children in special schools. A separate concern was that some parents do not fully understand IEPs and some parents are themselves unable to read and therefore cannot participate in the IEP process.

System Level Issues

IEPs have not been in existence in Irish schools over a prolonged period of time and it is possible that the experiences reported here reflect part of an evolving process. A system clearly evolves over time and teachers in this sample were reflecting on only three years of practice. Even over three years a numbers of changes and refinements had been made to the system, including greater efforts to engage parents. In international literature, dissatisfaction with administration, including reviewing and monitoring has emerged quite quickly while the critique of individualisation has emerged chronologically later. These early concerns, as we have seen, were important to teachers in this research. Perhaps the Irish experience will echo a similar pattern of evolution. In another few years, as administration and monitoring become better managed, other issues may gain prominence, such as student participation or concerns about IEPs being too narrow.

Hackman and Oldman (1982) make the point that teacher motivation is extremely important. Unless teachers view tasks as meaningful they may not be carried out in a meaningful way. Therefore, to coerce teachers to complete IEPs, when motivation to do so is poor, may negate the purpose and usefulness of IEPs. In Ireland, there is certainly no requirement to have an IEP for a student, but at the same time it would be wrong to imply that teachers in this survey had absolute choice in the matter of developing IEPs. This was an intervention supported by the school management and school principal and in real terms, teachers were expected to co-operate with this. The success of the IEP programme reflects the professionalism and commitment of the teaching staff. The same qualities were in evidence in the completion of the questionnaires (a totally voluntary task), where responses were characterised by detailed comments and reflective contributions. Keeping this element of choice and motivation may be very important in developing effective IEP systems in Irish schools.

CONCLUSION

As Kaye and Aserlind (1979) argue, IEPs can be effective if they are perceived as both a product and, most importantly, a process. In the school reported on here it is apparent that this has been achieved. There is no claim here that the IEP (as a product) or the IEP process is in some way perfect, but it is apparent that it is a useful product and a valuable process. Irish teachers have much to learn from colleagues in other countries about the experience of working with IEPs, but we are not doomed to replicate their mistakes. We have also a need for greater research in our own unique context. Certainly, this research suggests that IEPs can be deployed to meet the needs of children with special educational needs in a way that is experienced as generally positive and helpful to teachers. The existence of choice and flexibility in whatever system we introduce may be important factors in the success of that system. 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. Ultimately an IEP should only exist in so far as it is helpful to the teacher in teaching and to the learner in learning. This research found that in this special school, this fundamental requirement was met.

REFERENCES

8

Dudley-Marling, C. (1985). Perceptions of the usefulness of the IEP by teachers of learning disabled and emotionally disturbed children. *Psychology in the Schools*, *22* (1), 65-67.

Fletcher, N. (1998). *An investigation of the written planning process by special education teachers for individual pupils with special educational needs and the facilitation of the same by the principals of special schools.* Unpublished dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the MA Educational Psychology Degree, University College Dublin.

Gerber, P., Banbury, M., & Miller, J. (1986). Special educators: perceptions of parental participation in the Individual Education Plan process. *Psychology in the Schools*, *23* (2), 158-163.

Goldstein, S. (1993). The IEP conference: Little things mean a lot. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 26* (1), 60-61.

Gross, J. (2000). Paper promises? Making the code work for you. *Support for Learning, 15* (3), 126-133.

Hackman, J., & Oldham, G. (1982). Motivation through the design of work. In D. Nadler, M. Tushman & N. Hatvany (Eds.), *Managing organizations: Readings and cases*. Boston: Little Brown.

Hart, S. (1998). Paperwork or practice? Shifting the emphasis of the Code towards teaching, learning and inclusion. *Support for Learning*, *13* (20), 76-81.

Kaye, N. & Aserlind, R. (1979). The IEP: The ultimate process. *Journal of Special Education, 13* (2), 137-143.

Margolis, H., & Truesdell, L.A. (1987). Do special education teachers use IEPs to guide instruction? *Urban Review*, *19* (3), 151-159.

McKellar, N.A. (1991). Enhancing the IEP process through consultation. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 2* (2), 175-187.

Morgan, D., & Rhode, G. (1983). Teachers' attitudes towards IEPs: A two-year follow-up. *Exceptional Children*, *50* (1), 64-67.

Muncey, J., & McGinty, J. (1998). Target setting in special schools. *British Journal of Special Education, 25* (4), 173-178.

Ofsted (1999). *The SEN Code of Practice:Tthree years on*. London: Ofsted.

Pearson, S. (2000). The relationship between school culture and IEPs. *British Journal of Special Education, 27* (3), 145-149.

Peters, M. (1990). Someone's missing: The student as overlooked participant in the IEP process. *Preventing school failure*, *34* (4), 32-36.

Salend, S. J. (1983). Self assessment: A model for involving students in the formulation of their IEPs. *Journal of School Psychology*, *21,* (1), 65-70.

Tod, J. (1999). IEPs: Inclusive educational practices? *Support for Learning, 14* (4), 184-188.

Vacc, N.A., Vallecorsa, A.L., Parker, A., Bonner, S., Lester, C., Richardson, S., & Yates, C. (1985). Parents' and educators' participation in IEP conferences. *Education & Treatment of Children, 8* (2), 153-162.

Vaughan, S., Bos, C., Harrell, J., & Lasky, B. (1988). Parental participation in the initial placement/IEP conference ten years after mandated involvement. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 21* (2), 82-89.