

Teachers' Knowledge and Practice Relating to the Individual Education Plan and Learning Outcomes for Pupils with Special Educational Needs

There is increasing evidence that the individual education plan (IEP) is an integral part of special educational needs (SEN) provision, and that the process of devising an IEP is important, and not just the finished product (Tennant, 2007). The Department of Education and Skills has supported the professional development of teachers in the IEP process through funding post graduate courses in SEN and Special Education Support Service (SESS) courses on individualised planning. A study was conducted to evaluate the impact of professional development specifically related to the IEP process on the understanding, knowledge and practice of teachers who had completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs and on learning outcomes for their pupils with special educational needs (SEN). The study had two phases of data collection, the first involving the administration of a questionnaire and the second involving case studies incorporating individual and focus group interviews, observation of teaching and learning, and documentary analysis. This article reports on the first phase of the study with findings indicating that the IEP is an established feature of practice, functioning as a pedagogical tool but with potential for enhancement.

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INTRODUCTION

The individual education plan (IEP) is defined as “a written document prepared for a named student which specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved by the student over a set period of time and the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve these goals” (NCSE, 2006, p. xii). The purpose of the IEP is to ensure that the priority learning needs of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) are addressed in educational arrangements, that teaching is responsive to individual needs and learning styles, and that appropriate adaptations are made to

enable curriculum access (NCSE, 2006; Loreman, Deppeler and Harvey, 2010). Some of the principles underpinning the process of devising and implementing the IEP include: that it is collaborative with parental involvement, ongoing, and includes the setting of specific, measurable targets, with the child at the centre and involved through attendance at IEP meetings and contributing to development and review of the IEP (NCSE, 2006; Barnard-Brak and Lechtenberger, 2010). Many jurisdictions are governed by legislation establishing the implementation of the IEP as a requirement for pupils with a formal assessment of SEN (see Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O’Raw and Zhao, 2012). In Ireland, the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004) enshrines the principle of an appropriate and inclusive education and makes the preparation, implementation and review of the IEP a legal requirement. In response to this legislation and as a support to teachers, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published guidelines on the process of IEPs (NCSE, 2006). These guidelines have implications for teachers’ practice in terms of specific requirements relating to assessment, collaborative planning, teaching to accommodate individual priority learning needs and accountability.

However, due to economic decline, the commencement of certain sections of this Act was deferred in 2008. This included those sections which referred to individual assessment and education plans. Consequently, teachers have not been legally required to prepare IEPs, leaving vulnerable the status of the IEP as an established practice in the education of children with SEN. Research on the extent to which IEPs have been developed and implemented in ten primary schools across Ireland found that while schools are “taking the initiative in developing IEPs”, there is inconsistency in their use and in perceptions of their usefulness (Rose et al., 2012, p. 110). In only three of the ten schools, a number of staff “had received training” related to the development of IEPs. Thus they were “more likely to have adopted specific formats for IEPs and to implement them in a more cohesive manner within the school” (Rose et al., p. 113), supporting a link between continuous professional development (CPD) and practice.

In the context of an emergent and inconsistent approach to the development and implementation of IEPs in Ireland along with scant evaluation of CPD despite investment, a study was conducted to evaluate the impact of CPD specifically related to the IEP process. This focused on the understanding, knowledge and practice of teachers who had completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs and on learning outcomes for their pupils with SEN. The study had two phases, the first involving the administration of a questionnaire and the second involving case studies conducted in four primary schools and one post-primary school. This article focuses specifically on teachers’ perceptions of their

knowledge, understanding and practices relating to the IEP and learning outcomes for pupils with SEN, based on analysis of survey data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of IEPs is an established practice in many countries as a tool for individualising teaching and learning for pupils with SEN. Elements of good practice relating to the IEP process are increasingly documented in the research literature (Poppes, Vlaskamp, de Greeter and Nakken, 2002; Robertson and Cornwall, 2004; Goepel, 2009; Rose and Shevlin, 2010; Prunty, 2011; Bergin and Logan, 2013; Blackwell and Rossetti, 2014). Primarily, elements of good practice include parent and pupil participation, multi-disciplinary collaboration, and appropriate target review systems. Nonetheless, it has been argued that IEPs are “fraught with problems and have failed to live up to their original promise” (Christle and Yell, 2010, p. 113). For the purpose of this article, the literature review is structured to consider quality and efficacy of IEPs, and their implementation in teachers’ practice.

Quality

Research highlights the significance of the quality of IEPs, indicating that this is dependent on accuracy of assessment data to identify individual needs, effective assessment practices to inform instructional planning, and contextualisation of IEPs into whole-school planning and delivery of curriculum (Cooper, 1996; Blackwell and Rossetti, 2014). The practice of using standardised assessments has been reported as effective in relation to identifying individual needs and informing planning for students with learning difficulties (Isaksson, Lindqvist and Bergstron, 2010). However, standardised assessments may not be appropriate for all students with SEN. While Spears, Tollefson and Simpson (2001) report effective assessment practices related to diagnosis and placement of students with autism, use of assessment to inform curriculum and programme development for these students was not found to be as favourable. A study of assessment procedures for students with moderate and severe disabilities found that teachers were unlikely to engage in effective assessment practices that informed IEP development in relation to the curriculum, and did not often make meaningful connections between assessment data, IEP objectives and instructional planning (Siegel and Allinder, 2005). Additionally, a number of studies focusing specifically on the quality of IEPs in mainstream settings present findings to indicate problems with the extent to which instructional supports and IEP goals are appropriate to ensure student participation in general education programmes (Kurth and Mastergeorge, 2010; Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, Lee and Jung, 2010; Kwon, Elicker and Kontos, 2011). In light of

research citing lack of teacher expertise as a barrier to the inclusion of students with SEN (Drudy and Kinsella, 2009; Forlin, Keen and Barrett, 2008; Travers et al., 2010), it can be argued that teacher expertise has potential to influence the quality of both development and implementation of the IEP. As such, a study of teachers' perceptions of their knowledge, understanding and practices relating to the IEP should attend to aspects of assessment, IEP targets, instructional planning and links with curriculum.

Efficacy

Regarding the efficacy of IEPs, there are reports of agreement among policy makers, administrators and professionals in mainstream schools that IEPs and improvements in pupil attainment may be linked (Riddell, 2002). However, evidence substantiating this agreement is not widely reported. Indeed, examination of the relationship between IEP quality and student performance was recommended by Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) as a focus for future research, following their extensive review of 51 studies examining IEP development since 1997 in the United States. Based on research on IEPs in Sweden, the claim has been levied that IEPs are “used primarily as administrative tools rather than to help meet the educational and developmental needs of the pupils concerned” (Andreasson, Asp-Onsjo and Isaksson, 2013, p. 413). Over three decades ago, a longitudinal survey involving 611 special education teachers found a prevalence of negative attitudes towards IEPs, with teachers reporting that IEPs consumed a great deal of time, that they received little support from colleagues and that they could teach effectively without IEPs (Morgan and Rhode, 1983). The time-consuming nature of the IEP process continues as a criticism in more recent research which questions the benefits of the process in terms of making a difference to pupils' progress and learning outcomes (Tennant, 2007). Additionally, there continues to be a lack of teamwork and collaboration, and of parental and pupil involvement which is reported to have a diminishing impact on the potential of the IEP to effect change (Riddell, 2002; Stroggilos and Xanthacou, 2006; Tennant, 2007).

Indeed, the unproven efficacy of IEPs was one of three recurrent problems arising from a meta-analysis of almost 300 studies on IEPs which also highlighted the undue influence of behavioural psychology on IEPs and over-emphasis on the individual (Mitchell, Morton and Hornby, 2010). The efficacy of the IEP is critical to its incorporation in practice. However, use of an IEP to effect change requires understanding of “*what* an IEP is and *how* it should be used in practice” (italics in original) (Andreasson et al., 2013, p. 413). To this end, exploring and documenting teachers' perceptions of their knowledge, understanding and practices relating to the IEP and learning outcomes for pupils with SEN is timely.

Implementation

Although the use of IEPs is an established practice in many countries, research indicates that the incorporation of IEPs by teachers in practice may not be routine. Almost two decades ago, Emanuelsson and Persson (1997) reported that the majority of teachers in their study never used such plans. A survey conducted by the Swedish National Agency for Education (SNAE) found that although IEPs were prepared in schools, their use as “a qualified pedagogical instrument for collaboration between teachers, pupils and parents” was rare (SNAE, 1999, p. 100, cited in Andreasson et al., 2013). A more recent survey by the same agency found that IEPs had become fairly common in practice but were not prepared for a quarter of pupils with SEN for whom they were required (SNAE, 2003, cited in Andreasson et al.). Research in the Irish context reports the development and implementation of IEPs as an emerging system, where IEPs are becoming an established feature of practice but with inconsistency in their use (Rose et al., 2012). The contextual factors highlighted here inform the focus of this study and contribute to framing the analysis of data relating to teachers’ perceptions of their knowledge, understanding and practices relating to the IEP and learning outcomes for pupils with SEN.

METHODOLOGY

The first phase of data collection for the study required a quantitative survey, involving the administration of a questionnaire designed to elicit teachers’ perceptions of: (1) the impact of CPD related to the IEP process on their knowledge, skills, understanding and practice; (2) the impact of the IEP on practice, and (3) their use of the IEP to measure and improve learning outcomes for pupils with SEN. The questionnaire comprised of five sections. The first section was designed to elicit background information on the participants and included questions on gender, age, teacher role, number of years teaching pupils with SEN, and professional development on the IEP process. The second section consisted of a Likert rating scale to explore the impact of CPD on the IEP process on teachers’ knowledge, skills, understanding and practice. Practices relating to the IEP were addressed in the third section. The focus of the fourth section was on the use of the IEP to direct and measure learning outcomes for pupils with SEN. Participants’ general comments on the IEP process were sought in the final section. There were 38 questions in total and the questionnaire took approximately twenty minutes to complete. Piloting with twelve teachers who had completed the taught elements of a Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs course in the academic year 2013-2014 resulted in rephrasing of a number of questions for clarity and in modifications to layout and a coding frame.

Participants were recruited via postal survey from the 165 teachers who completed the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs in one Third Level Institution in the Leinster region of Ireland, in the academic years of 2010-2011, 2011-2012 and 2012-2013. This programme provides CPD on the IEP process and includes an assessment component based on the teacher's ability to complete an IEP and incorporate it in teaching plans and practice. Questionnaires were returned from 83 teachers, securing a response rate of 50%.

Returned completed questionnaires, were assigned identification numbers and all responses were coded according to a predetermined coding frame. To devise the coding frame, each question was given a variable name and label. A value label was assigned arbitrarily and consistently to each possible response within questions, and a variable label was assigned to each variable. The final coding frame included a total of 136 variables. In adhering to the coding frame, data were entered in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency analysis and cross tabulation were completed to cross-check for data entry errors and coding inconsistencies (Robson, 2011). Statistical analysis for this paper was predominantly descriptive and findings were organised categorically as follows: teachers' background information; teachers' perceptions of the impact of CPD on the IEP process on their knowledge, skills, understanding and practice; teachers' perceptions of practices relating to the IEP; and, teachers' perceptions of the use of the IEP to direct and measure learning outcomes for pupils with SEN. These findings are reported in the following section.

FINDINGS

Background Information

All participants taught students with SEN in a range of settings including primary (n=57), post-primary (n=9) and special schools (n=17). Regarding teaching experience, teachers' number of years teaching generally ranged from four to 41 years averaging approximately 16 years while their number of years teaching in special education was somewhat less, ranging from two to 18 years with an average of seven years. Apart from the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs, one quarter of teachers (n=21) had no other opportunities for CPD on the IEP process in contrast to one third of teachers (n=28) who identified the 'summer course' as providing such an opportunity. Less frequently cited sources of CPD on the IEP process were on-site school based programmes (n=13), a masters' programme (n=11), Education Centres (n=7) and the Special Education Support Services (SESS) (n=7).

Teachers’ perceptions of the impact of CPD on the IEP process on teachers’ knowledge, skills, understanding and practice

Overall, teachers were positive regarding the extent to which their knowledge, skills and practice in relation to IEPs had improved as a result of participating in the Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs. Although knowledge and skills were rated separately from practice on the same indicators, teachers’ perceptions of the extent of improvement of knowledge and skills were almost equivalent to their perceptions of the extent of improvement in practice, as evident in the ranking of indicators in Table 1.

Table 1. Teacher perceptions of the extent of improvement in knowledge, skills and practice as a result of CPD

Indicator	Competency type	Good to very good improvement	Unsure about improvement	Poor improvement
Selecting teaching methods/strategies to address targets	Knowledge and skills	96.3%	3.7%	0%
	Practice	94%	6%	0%
Diagnostic assessment to identify strengths and needs	Knowledge and skills	95.2%	3.6%	1.2%
	Practice	96.4%	2.4%	1.2%
Writing IEP targets	Knowledge and skills	93.8%	4.9%	1.2%
	Practice	92.8%	6%	1.2%
Implementing IEP	Knowledge and skills	90.1%	8.6%	1.2%
	Practice	90.4%	8.4%	1.2%
Collaboration with others about IEP	Knowledge and skills	86.8%	12%	1.2%
	Practice	87.8%	11%	1.2%
Co-ordinating IEP	Knowledge and skills	84.3%	14.5%	1.2%
	Practice	84.3%	15.7%	0%
Reviewing IEP	Knowledge and skills	82.9%	15.9%	1.2%
	Practice	84.3%	14.5%	1.2%

While the extent of improvement reported by teachers on indicators relating to assessment, planning and teaching to address specific learning needs is encouraging, this is less so on critical elements of the IEP process concerned with collaboration, co-ordination and review. Apart from the perceived benefits to them, an overwhelming majority of teachers (98.8%, n=82) considered that CPD on the IEP process was essential for all practising teachers teaching pupils with SEN.

Teachers' perceptions of practices relating to the IEP

The development and implementation of the IEP was an established feature of practice for all teachers who participated in phase one of the study. For the majority of teachers (92.6%, n=75), it is the practice to hold IEP meetings. Regarding frequency, once a year is most common (n=36), while for almost one quarter of teachers (n=20), IEP meetings are held once a term. Parents (reported by 98% of teachers), class teachers (reported by 90% of teachers) and learning support/resource teachers (reported by 72% of teachers) are most likely to attend the IEP meeting. Less likely to attend are special needs assistants (SNAs) (reported by 50%) and least likely are the pupils (reported by 19% of teachers). Although they may not be present at IEP meetings, 28.4% (n=23) of teachers reported that pupils are provided with an opportunity to express their views in relation to their IEP with 45.7% (n=37) of teachers reporting that pupils are *sometimes* provided with such an opportunity. To this end, practices vary with teachers reporting that they have an informal talk with the pupils (n=13), ask pupils to identify topics with which they need help (n=12) or use teacher-constructed questionnaires (n=6).

The responsibility for writing the IEP is predominantly undertaken by the learning support/resource teacher (reported by 72.3% of teachers). While over one third of class teachers (36.1%, n=30) are reported as writing the IEP, 26 of these are class teachers in a special school or a special class in a mainstream school, while class teachers in post-primary schools typically write sections relevant to their subject areas. Although specific teachers assume responsibility for writing the IEP, practices relating to the IEP process in terms of preparation, implementation and review are regarded by the majority of teachers (95%, n=77) as involving a team including the pupil and all those involved with the pupil. Of those who receive a copy of the pupil's IEP, the pupil's teachers are the most likely (reported by 86.7% of teachers) followed by their parents (reported by 78.3% of teachers). Less likely to receive a copy is the school principal (reported by 45.8% of teachers) and the SNA (reported by 24.1% of teachers) while one fifth of teachers report that it is practice to provide other professionals with a copy of the IEP. Least likely to receive a copy of the IEP are the pupils, with only 4.8% of teachers reporting this practice. Despite this, 34.1% (n=28) of teachers report that pupils with SEN

are made aware of their IEP targets, with 54.2% (n=45) reporting that the pupils are *sometimes* made aware of targets. Practices relating to the pupil's IEP targets reported by teachers indicate that these are typically addressed by appropriate teaching methods and strategies (84.6%, n=66) and made known to all involved in the pupil's education (75.3%, n=61) but less typically incorporated in the class teacher's plans (43.2%, n=35).

Teachers' perceptions on the use of the IEP to direct and measure learning outcomes for pupils with SEN

Regarding use of the IEP to measure learning outcomes for pupils with SEN, the majority of teachers reported that this was the practice in their schools (74.4%, n=61) while almost one quarter were unsure (23.2%, n=19). However, 94% (n=78) of teachers agreed that the IEP was a useful tool for measuring learning outcomes for pupils with SEN. Additionally, 87.9% (n=71) of teachers disagreed that the IEP was a paperwork exercise that would make no difference to learning outcomes for pupils with SEN. Writing SMART targets, including an achievement criterion and linking the end of year report with progress towards achievement of targets on the IEP, were identified by teachers as facilitating the use of IEPs to measure learning outcomes for pupils with SEN.

LIMITATIONS

Although the response rate was satisfactory, the sample size in the survey phase of this study is small and thus, lack of generalisability to the wider population of teachers is a limitation of the study. Additionally, it should be noted that the number of post-primary teachers who participated in the survey is low (n=9) and constitutes only one third of potential post-primary participants, further limiting the generalisation of findings. While acknowledging these limitations, the study has potential to inform teachers and others of the importance of understanding the IEP process.

DISCUSSION

Developing on the practices reported by Rose et al. (2012), findings of this study indicate that the development and implementation of the IEP is an established feature of practice in the education of pupils with SEN among the 83 teachers who responded to the survey, regardless of legal requirement. Key elements of the IEP including student learning needs, long term goals, learning targets, teaching methods and strategies, as identified in the relevant provisions of EPSEN (Ireland, 2004) and as indicated by research to support the quality of the IEP (Blackwell and

Rossetti, 2014), appear to be considered and addressed in the IEPs developed and implemented by the teachers in this study. Teacher reports of strong improvement in their use of diagnostic assessment to identify individual strengths and needs are encouraging as the quality of assessment data used to identify individual needs is a contributory factor to the quality of the IEP (Cooper, 1996). Additionally and contrary to previous reports (Riddell, 2002; Tennant, 2007), the majority of teachers engage in the practice of using IEPs to measure learning outcomes for pupils with SEN. While this could be higher, it nonetheless indicates teachers' establishment of connections between assessment data, learning targets and the instructional programme, again supporting the quality of the IEP (Cooper, 1996; Siegel and Allinder, 2005). As such, teachers are demonstrating an understanding of what an IEP is and how it should be used in practice, argued by Andreasson et al. (2013) as essential if IEPs are to effect change. Moreover, these findings indicate that IEPs are functioning as pedagogical tools for teachers and their learners. Indeed, the pedagogical value of the IEP may explain its uptake in practice by all teachers in this study.

Regarding collaborative involvement in development of the IEP, parental attendance at the IEP meeting is high, and furnishing parents and class teachers with a copy of the IEP appears common practice. However, teacher perceptions and reported practices relating to collaboration and co-ordination of the IEP process and the low level of incorporation of IEP targets in the class teacher's plans support a need to further develop collaborative and co-ordination skills for implementation. These contribute to contextualisation of IEPs into whole school planning and delivery of curriculum, also crucial to the quality of the IEP (Cooper, 1996; Kurth and Mastergeorge, 2010; Ruble et al., 2010; Kwon et al., 2011). Additionally, the contextualisation of IEPs into whole school planning and delivery of curriculum would enhance the pedagogical value of the IEP. This has implications for CPD programmes.

Apart from a Post Graduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs, a quarter of the teachers had no other opportunities for CPD on the IEP process. Moreover, an overwhelming majority of teachers considered that CPD on the IEP process was essential for all practising teachers teaching pupils with SEN. In the context of the findings of this study juxtaposed with previous research on quality and efficacy of IEPs, it would seem appropriate for CPD on the IEP process to attend to the development of teacher expertise in skills and competencies related to ensuring that the IEP functions as a pedagogical tool, contextualised into whole school planning, while meaningfully meeting the developmental and educational needs of the learners for whom they are developed.

CONCLUSION

Regarding knowledge and practice relating to the IEP, in so far as teachers can use diagnostic assessment data to identify student learning needs, long term goals, learning targets, teaching methods and strategies in IEP development and implementation, the IEP has a valued use as a pedagogical tool for teachers and their learners. Enhancing this pedagogical function and facilitating the contextualisation of the IEP into whole school planning and curriculum delivery requires further collaboration and co-ordination with increased levels of incorporation of IEP targets in class teacher plans. This has implications for teacher expertise with attendant implications for the focus of CPD programmes.

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