An Individual Education Plan for Pupils with Special Educational Needs: How Inclusive is the Process for the Pupil?

This article reports research on current practice in Ireland with regard to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process focusing on pupil involvement. It identifies and asserts a challenge to teachers in line with inclusion ideology and concludes that the motivation and empowerment benefits of including the pupil's voice in the IEP process can be best supported through appropriate teacher professional development.

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INTRODUCTION

In an Irish context, the *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process* published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (NCSE, 2006), provide the most comprehensive source of guidance for the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process. The guidelines reflect current international 'best practice' which emphasises the pupil as "central to a successful outcome" of the process (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2001a, Section 4, p. 12), highlighting that active pupil involvement in the IEP process can significantly contribute to the ultimate achievement of targets (NCSE).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The IEP, both the document and the process, is widely accepted as a support that enables pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to access the general curriculum and upholds their right to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms (McCausland, 2005). Nugent's (2002) definition of an IEP emphasises an underlying conceptual understanding of the IEP as a means to and a context for inclusion of pupils with SEN. Nugent defines the IEP as:

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. The process of developing an IEP should involve collaboration with the students and parents (p. 99).

Before considering the challenges which may arise on a practical level, it is interesting to look at how, philosophically, pupil involvement is regarded both in international literature and in an Irish context. It seems that pupils 'may' be involved where 'appropriate', evidence of which can be found in some international publications including; *'Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs'* in the United Kingdom (UK) (Department for Education and Skills, DfES, 2001b)*, 'Individual Education Plans'* in Australia (Queensland Department of Education, 2003) and '*A Guide to the Individualized Education Program*' in the United States (US) (United States Department of Education, 2000). This language appears to undermine a pupil's right to be involved in the IEP process. In Ireland, the *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process* state that, "the child, if appropriate and other professionals may also be members of the team" (NCSE, 2006, p. 18). The guidelines go on to say that, "in some cases a familiar and sympathetic adult should spend some time with the student enabling him/her to express his/her views" (NCSE, p. 55). Such language may allow for flexibility within the process. However, such ambiguity of language leaves pupils with SEN vulnerable to being excluded from the process if an adult team-member deems their involvement to be inappropriate. Some schools find it beneficial to ask a pupil to join in the IEP meeting at the end of the process suggesting that, "It is a good idea for the student, where appropriate, to sign the completed IEP" (NCSE, p. 55). However well-meaning this suggestion may be, it is not appropriate to ask a pupil to 'sign off' on what is written about them. It is simply not enough to suggest that pupil involvement is 'good practice' but rather that it is an absolute imperative and integral part of IEP preparation.

Current literature highlights that teachers face many challenges during the implementation of the IEP process (Menlove, 1999; Nugent, 2002; DeSimone and Parmar, 2006; Lee-Tarver, 2006; McCarthy, 2006; Goepel, 2009; Prunty, 2011). Research evidence is accumulating to suggest that practical difficulties exist for teachers; a lack of time to meet and plan the IEP, an absence of some team-members from IEP meetings, few team-members being given a final IEP document, a lack of training for some team-members and a lack of skills necessary to include pupils in the process (Menlove; Konrad and Test, 2004; Lee-Tarver; Van Dycke, Martin and Lovett, 2006; Goepel; Prunty).

Regarding pupil involvement specifically, a study carried out by Mason, McGahee-Kovac, Johnson and Stillerman (2002) found that when pupils with SEN had at least two years experience of being involved in their own IEP process they needed less support from adult team-members and displayed much more self-confidence in their approach to their own education. Mason et al. suggest that early involvement of the pupil in the process supports richer involvement in the future. However, not all studies examining pupil involvement in the IEP process specifically convey such positive results. An American study of 109 IEP meetings noted that although pupils were officially 'involved' in the process, they scored significantly less than other participants on IEP knowledge (Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, Gardner, Christensen, Woods and Lovett, 2006). Likewise, Goepel (2009) found that the voice of the teacher was most dominant in the IEP document and that there were instances of the pupil raising issues at IEP meetings that were not mentioned in the final IEP. Such disregard for pupils' views is of huge concern especially as these pupils were considered to be 'involved' in the process by adult team-members. *The SEN Toolkit* considers that inclusion of pupils at IEP meetings is not necessarily 'involvement' in its true sense and that pupils need training in giving their views on their IEP (DfES, 2001b). Furthermore, studies have shown that if pupil 'involvement' is unplanned and unstructured, it can have a very negative effect on pupil morale (Power, Turner, Matuszewski, Wilson and Loesch, 1999; Van Dycke et al., 2006). However, when pupils are supported to make decisions regarding their own education, they become an advocate and an active participant in their own education (Glor-Scheib and Telthorster, 2006). Such studies highlight the need for a definition of what it means to have a pupil 'involved' in their own IEP development.

Pupil involvement could be defined as pupils with SEN determining their preferences in relation to their education by reporting on their strengths, weaknesses and goals for the future with the rest of their IEP team. Involvement should wholly place the pupil at the centre of the process. The highest level of pupil involvement could be considered to be where pupils are full IEP team-members who act as self-advocates in the process (Mason et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2006; Van Dycke et al., 2006).

Two Irish studies, Nugent (2002) and McCarthy (2006) were largely positive with regard to pupils being involved in the process. However, the pupils in Nugent's small-scale study of thirteen teachers in a special school setting generally spoke with a psychologist prior to the IEP meeting regarding their progress and goals for the future. This is atypical in an Irish mainstream context. Similarly, McCarthy

found in his study of seventy-six teachers from nineteen special schools that almost half (49%) of the teachers included the pupil in the formation of the IEP document and almost the same percentage of teachers included the pupil at the implementation stage of the process. However, in these studies, the level of pupil involvement may be higher than would otherwise be the case as the pupil-teacher ratio is more favourable in a special school setting than is the case in a mainstream setting. A more recent study of 213 teachers from both mainstream and special school settings investigated current practices in relation to the IEP process for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) (Prunty, 2011). Regarding pupil involvement, only eight percent attended IEP meetings. Furthermore, only four percent of pupils received a copy of the IEP after the process took place. The level of inclusion of pupils is dramatically lower in this study, which is perhaps more reflective of what occurs in mainstream settings.

Having analysed the relevant research, the purpose of this study was to investigate what is occurring in a sample of mainstream primary schools with regard to the IEP process, to ascertain if the difficulties related to pupil involvement which are experienced in other contexts are being experienced in mainstream settings, and to document teachers' attitudes to the process.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods design was used to explore current practices in schools and teachers' perspectives on the IEP process. In phase one, a postal survey gathered mainly quantitative data from 160 teachers and in phase two detailed semi-structured interviews were conducted with five teachers. The research received the approval of the Ethics Committee of St. Patrick's College, Dublin. Questionnaires were sent to all teachers (n=320) working in a purposive sample of seventeen mainstream primary schools which included junior and senior schools, rural and urban schools and schools with 'disadvantaged' status. A cover letter attached to the questionnaire outlined the purpose of the study and provided definitions of technical terms used.

The survey was divided into four sections. Section One gathered factual information regarding teaching experience, qualifications in the area of SEN and training regarding IEPs. Section Two asked if the participant had ever been involved in the IEP process. A filter question directed participants who were not previously involved in the IEP process to Section Three. Those who had been involved in the process were asked to focus on one pupil throughout the section.

Questions were asked regarding the details of the IEP meeting and the review process in this section. In Section Three, a Likert-scale was used to gather information in regard to teachers' opinions of the IEP process. Some open-ended questions were asked focusing on difficulties that may be encountered with regard to the process. Section Four asked for volunteers to take part in the interview process.

Eight teachers volunteered to be interviewed. Factors such as teaching role, training and geographical location were considered in selecting five participants for interview. At the time of the study, Mary and Rose were class teachers and Jackie, Orla and Lucy worked as support teachers (pseudonyms are used throughout). Mary and Rose had three years and six years teaching experience respectively. Jackie and Lucy both had twenty years teaching experience and Orla had thirty-seven years experience. The interview schedule explored different aspects of the topic including the process in the participants' school context and pupil involvement.

Minor changes were made to the questionnaire and interview schedule following piloting. Questionnaires were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (15.0) which was used to generate descriptive statistics relating to pupil involvement in the IEP process. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reported here relate to aspects of pupil involvement in the IEP process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In all, 160 of the 320 teachers surveyed responded, giving a response rate of fifty percent. Almost two-thirds of the sample (sixty-five percent, n=104) were class teachers and thirty-four percent (n=55) had a support teaching role. One teacher did not specify their role. The term 'support teacher' was taken to include learning support/resource teachers, learning support teachers, resource teachers for pupils with SEN and special class teachers. As respondents were asked to keep one IEP process in mind while answering questions, the data gathered reflected a *snapshot in time* of one specific IEP process, as opposed to an overview of teachers' experiences of every process they had previously been involved in. Data from the interviewees highlighted that each IEP process is different. Lucy stated that, "There were no hard and fast rules" when asked about how the process was carried out in her school. Jackie confirmed that this was the case in her school also:

Each process is very different for us. It very much depends on who's around on the day to attend [the meeting] and who we can get to stand in to classes [to supervise] and how quickly we can get through everything.

Only teachers who had previous experience of IEPs answered questions regarding current practice. The number of participants in each data set is given on occasions when the total amount (160) did not respond.

With regard to attendance at the IEP meeting, of the 132 participants who answered this question, ninety-four percent (n=124) said that the class teacher attended, ninety-five percent (n=125) reported that support teachers attended and seventy-six percent (n=100) reported parents attending (Table 1). Thirty-five percent of respondents (n=46) said that SNAs attended and twenty-seven percent (n=36) reported that principals were present. Only eight percent (n=11) of respondents said that pupils were at the meetings. Furthermore, two percent of pupils (n=3) received a copy of the IEP and three percent (n=4) attended the review meeting. The results are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Teamwork in the IEP process

Team Members	Who received a copy of the IEP?	Who attended the IEP Meeting?	Who attended the Review Meeting?
Class Teachers	88% (n=116)	94% (n=124)	74% (n=98)
Support Teachers	92% (n=121)	95% (n=125)	81% (n=106)
Parents	60% (n=79)	76% (n=100)	48% (n=63)
Principals	42% (n=56)	27% (n=36)	8% (n=11)
SNAs	25% (n=33)	35% (n=46)	23% (n=30)
Pupils	2% (n=3)	8% (n=11)	3% (n=4)

* Based on responses from 132 participants

Three questions were raised in relation to the involvement of pupils in the IEP process. Firstly, do teachers believe that IEPs are of use to a pupil? Secondly, should the pupil be involved in the process? And thirdly, if this is the case, how can pupil involvement take place in a meaningful manner? It seems that teachers consider IEPs to be of use for pupils. Of the 158 participants who answered this question, eighty percent (n=126) either "strongly agreed" (twenty-five percent, n=39) or

"agreed" (fifty-five percent, n=87) with the statement, 'IEPs allow pupils with SEN to access the curriculum more fully'. Furthermore, agreement that IEPs allow pupils with SEN to access the curriculum would appear to be higher among teachers with training in the IEP process (n=60) than among those without such training (n=98). Of the ninety-eight teachers without training seventy-four percent (n=73) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement as compared to ninety percent (n=54) of those with such training. Moreover, the levels of agreement would appear to be higher among teachers with training, forty-eight percent (n=29) of whom 'strongly agreed' that IEPs facilitate curriculum access in contrast with fourteen percent (n=14) of those without such training. This suggests that training may influence teachers' opinions on whether an IEP can act as a tool to allow pupils with SEN to be educated successfully in a mainstream setting. Of the 149 participants who responded to the statement 'The IEP supports learning for pupils with SEN' the vast majority of teachers (ninety-one percent, n=135) said that they 'strongly agreed' (thirty-seven percent, n=55) or 'agreed' (fifty-four percent, n=80) with the statement.

The involvement of pupils in the process was a divisive issue for teachers in this study. Of the 158 participants who responded to the statement 'If pupils are involved the IEP process is more likely to be successful' almost half of teachers with and without training (forty-two percent, n=25, forty-five percent, n=44) remain undecided in their opinion. Interestingly, all five teachers interviewed considered the pupil to be at the heart of the process. Lucy said, "If we include them [pupils], there is a whole sense of ownership of their education, the IEP is for them, you know?" However, even though three of these teachers specifically said that the pupil was 'included', pupils were asked for their strengths and needs only. The difficulty of putting theory into practice is highlighted in Lucy's following remark, "It's just hard to know exactly how to go about it [including the pupil in the process]". Such a comment demonstrates the genuine willingness on the part of this teacher to include pupils once they have the know-how.

How pupil involvement is defined was also an issue for teachers in this study. Lucy highlighted her concerns:

> So we consider them to be included in the process, right? But nine times out of ten we don't tell them formally what we've decided for them. Even the wording I use shows you what stage we're at and how much they [pupils] are really included.

In response to this, Mary considered taking small steps to improve the process suggesting that the language used regarding pupil inclusion is as important as their physical presence at meetings:

A teacher can always ask the child what they would like to work on in the coming year or ask them about what they want to work on, even to phrase it that you are working with them and not just for them.

However, Jackie hoped that pupil involvement would not lead to more meetings. Lucy went on to suggest a practical solution to these difficulties, "Maybe it could take place as part of a resource time? The child could be *involved* [emphasis Lucy's own] by taking part in a series of 'meetings' as part of their resource time? Maybe that's more appropriate?"

Rose identified that training may be needed to approach this new step:

My only concern would be about their [the pupils] confidence and if being involved would end up having a negative affect? I suppose we'd have to learn a language around it [including pupils in the process], not being patronising but to be able to discuss their learning with them. It's a whole skill to learn.

Certainly, training for pupils would support them to understand the process first and then become involved in a gradual and supported manner. This is also less likely to negatively affect pupils' self-confidence (Van Dycke et al., 2006). The challenges that exist with regard to pupil inclusion in the IEP process are well documented in this study. However, it is possible that with support and training, teachers could lead the IEP process in a manner that keeps the pupil at the heart of it.

Limitations
In this study, the purposive nature and the size of this sample and the fact that the views of only teachers were sought, limits the generalisation of the findings. When looking specifically at the area of pupil involvement, it would be prudent to ask pupils themselves how they felt with regard to the process. Further studies are needed to investigate such issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Practice and Policy
Although it could be said that teachers view pupil involvement in the IEP process as important, some difficulty still exists as to how, in a practical sense, this involvement can be achieved. However, there are many programmes available to support the involvement of pupils. Konrad and Test (2004) found that structured lessons in IEP participation increased pupil ability to contribute to the process at the five stages of drafting, the meeting, finalising, implementation and review.

'GO 4 IT...NOW' (Konrad, Trela and Test, 2006) is a strategic instruction based on 'Self-Regulated Strategy Development' (Graham and Harris, 2005). Test, Mason, Hughes, Konrad, Neale and Wood (2004) recommend that if pupils do take part in the IEP meeting, they should be given the opportunity to rehearse their participation. There are many resources available online to support this, such as '*Student Led IEPs: A Guide for Student Involvement*' (McGahee, Mason, Wallace and Jones, 2001) and '*Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers*' (MacBeath, Demetriou, Rudduck and Myers, 2003). Based on any of the above programmes, a series of lessons could be devised in a resource setting to support pupils in understanding the IEP process and the final document that is written.

Pupils with SEN are not a homogenous group and include pupils of all ages and cognitive abilities. This suggests the need, perhaps, for a *continuum* of involvement. This would allow for flexibility in the level of involvement but still reflect a pupil's fundamental right to be involved in the IEP process. Ware (2004) discusses the possibilities for involvement with pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties using video recordings and proxies. Additionally, the use of technology to assist in preparing an electronic portfolio would ensure that pupils with more significant communication needs could show their views and goals for themselves in a visual manner and ensure that they are not overwhelmed in a mainly 'adult' setting (Glor-Scheib and Telthorster, 2006).

An abridged form of the IEP could also be made available for some pupils, providing information appropriate to their level of cognitive understanding. The IEP could be separated into two sections: one which covers all the background information (*Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN)* (Ireland, 2004, Sections A to G) and another which covers Section H (the goals which the pupil is to achieve, which typically breaks down into targets and strategies) on a separate page. This second page would not contain any confidential information and could therefore be given to pupils while still protecting their privacy (Mary Nugent, personal communication, April 13th, 2011).

Future Research
As yet, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that pupils with SEN do any better educationally with the support of an IEP than those without. This is highlighted in many studies (Gross, 2000; Nugent, 2002; McCarthy, 2006). A long-term study seems timely to discover if a pupil with SEN achieves more educationally and socially by having an IEP. This is necessary so that the implementation of such a time consuming and complex process is 'evidence-based'.

The voice of pupils with SEN has been recognised as an important aspect of the development of a more inclusive education system (Prunty, 2011). A clear definition of what 'involvement' means within a specific school setting is essential as a pupils' presence at meetings is not 'proof' of their inclusion in the process. It would be interesting to carry out a study to discover if there is any correlation between a pupils' presence at meetings and their 'voice' in the final IEP document. If there is not a correlation, it may be that educators need to investigate ways of supporting pupils with SEN in mainstream settings.

The teachers who participated in this study arguably may differ from the main body of teachers in terms of their attitudes. It would be appropriate to carry out a larger scale study using a randomised sample to see if similar findings emerge. This would determine the applicability of the current findings to a more representative sample of respondents. Ideally, special efforts should be made to access the views of a sample of first time non-respondents to note any significant differences between the values of those teachers and those who responded in this study.

SUMMARY

The philosophy of inclusion can be strengthened through the language used by educators. An IEP is not created 'for' a pupil but rather 'with' a pupil. Such changes in language although small, are hugely significant for the establishment of a pupil's right to be included in the process. It is hoped that the findings of this small study and the recommendations outlined above may be of interest to and support the work of IEP team-members seeking to work with pupils with SEN in a process that is ultimately concerned with empowering them to learn.

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