How effective do teachers perceive Individual Education Plans to be for informing planning in the Early Years Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1? The STeP Journal Student Teacher Perspectives Copyright © 2015 University of Cumbria Vol 2 (1) pages 55-63

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Abstract

This small-scale mixed method research project explores perceptions of the use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in a primary school. The project found that teachers tend to perceive IEPs of little value to the planning and teaching process, only consulting them as frequently as their school policy requires. It therefore examines factors which may increase their value. Findings suggest that increased pupil involvement in target-setting would aid the effectiveness of IEPs, along with a reduction in the number produced. The project also found that, in line with Department for Education (DfE) guidance, when the class teacher has greater involvement in the formulation of IEPs their perceived usefulness increases.

Introduction

My research explores the effectiveness of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for informing planning in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1. It uses teacher perception as a gauge, and highlights similarities and differences between the two phases. It also seeks to ascertain which factors could make planning more effective for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

According to the DfES, "The IEP is a planning, teaching and reviewing tool" (2001a, p. 65). It is put in place for a child who is identified as having SEN, should contain three or four targets, should be discussed with the parents and the child, and should only record needs beyond curriculum differentiation (DfES, 2001b, p. 37). The IEP is intended to help children with SEN make progress. It is a particularly relevant time to research IEPs, as the new approach to SEN which came into effect from September 2014, removes advice about IEPs (DfE, 2011, p.98).

My rationale for exploring the usefulness of IEPs is closely linked to my experience of a school in which IEPs were neither accessible to the teachers nor regularly updated. In this context, I found IEPs of little use for informing planning. The school was not following DfES guidance, which states: "The IEP must be accessible and understandable to all concerned" (DfES, 2001a, p. 65) and "should include information about the short-term targets set for the child" (DfES, 2001b, p.37). In my Reflective Journal I noted that, "the state of their IEPs has hindered pupils with SEN in my class" (U1317179, 2013, 10th December). The negative impact of these IEPs prompted me to investigate their effectiveness in another school. In addition, many schools are "identifying pupils as having special educational needs when they simply need better teaching and pastoral support." (Ofsted, 2010, p. 70). This is a practice I wish to avoid, differentiating planning to meet the needs of all pupils, but ensuring that IEPs are only written for pupils with SEN. I am carrying out this research to develop my understanding of the factors which aid planning for children with SEN.

Research Approach

Action research is a popular model of research in teaching, social work and nursing (McGrath and Coles, 2013, p. 104). In the context of teaching it is defined as "any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers...for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how **Citation**

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they teach and how their students learn" (Mertler, 2004, p. 9). Its aim is to inform and improve teachers' practices (Milton-Brkich et al, 2010). My research is action research as it follows this model. McGrath and Coles point out that action research should be a "cyclical" process – identifying a problem, collecting data, planning an intervention, and then repeating this until the problem is overcome (2013, p. 109). They also highlight the importance of sharing findings with other professionals, in order to bring about larger scale improvements in the teaching profession (Ibid., p. 109). As a result of these factors, Milton-Brkich et al consider action research to be the most useful form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (2010). There is controversy surrounding action research. This is because the emphasis seems to be placed on data collection rather than data analysis, and because the effects of the planned intervention are hard to prove (McGrath and Coles, 2013, p. 112). These issues are not insurmountable; the researcher can choose to carry out sufficient analysis of their data, and a causal link may be assumed if a problem diminishes when an intervention occurs.

My major data collection method was a questionnaire, with policy analysis forming a minor part of my research. A questionnaire was selected to gather the perceptions of a representative sample of teachers. I felt that the larger the sample, the more representative my findings would be. My questionnaire contained six questions. In response to the finding that, "if a questionnaire can't be completed in six to eight minutes, most people throw it in the bin" (McGrath and Coles, 2013, p. 155), no open questions were included. This was intended to minimise the time which the questionnaire took to complete, and to ensure a high return rate. Whilst my questionnaire appeared unorthodox, many of the questions were presented differently due to the nature of the response required, and I avoided the popular Likert-scale to increase the decisiveness of respondents.

Following the advice of McGrath and Coles, I piloted my questionnaire with a colleague as a means of quality control (2013, p. 157). No errors were flagged up, and I did not have to be too concerned about the use of jargon as all participants were teachers. I therefore distributed the questionnaire to all staff via their pigeon holes, and placed a box in the staffroom for completed questionnaires. In addition to data collection through questionnaires, I was able to carry out a small amount of document analysis. I was given access to a sample of IEPs by the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), and was able to cross-reference the teacher's plans for my class with their IEPs.

McGrath and Coles point out that almost all research is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (2013, p. 77). My research is no exception. The document analysis, which formed only a very small part of my research, requires a qualitative approach. With regards to my questionnaire, my methodology was semi-quantitative. When using a quantitative approach, "The idea is to be as objective as possible" (Ibid., p. 77). Since my gauge of IEPs' effectiveness was teacher perception, I could not be entirely objective. Instead I had to present largely qualitative information in a quantitative manner, hence my semi-quantitative methodology.

Throughout my research it was important that I followed the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines. This meant ensuring respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research and academic freedom (BERA, 2011, p. 3). In order to do this, I had to consider responsibilities to participants, sponsors of research, the community of educational researchers, educational professionals, policy makers and the general public (Ibid., p. 5). To meet these criteria, all participants were given an explanation of what they were contributing to before they completed the questionnaire. They were voluntary participants, whose anonymity was ensured and whose responses were kept confidential. In addition, I requested permission from the senior management team at the school before carrying out my research. I also gained their approval for my questionnaire. I ensured anonymity in the sample of IEPs, which I

collected with the permission of the SENCO and under her supervision. I felt that these actions fulfilled my ethical responsibilities to the participants, the school, the university and the profession.

Literature Review

At its height, the number of IEPs being produced was extraordinary, with almost one fifth of pupils in mainstream primary schools identified as having SEN (Gross, 2008). At this time, IEPs were Ofsted's means of assessing schools' provision for children with SEN (Gross, 2008). Gross notes, however, that things have changed. IEPs have become of decreased importance to Ofsted (2014). The emphasis has shifted towards schools' self-evaluation of their provision and their data on the progress of pupils with SEN (Gross, 2008). Both the government and Ofsted are calling for schools to identify fewer pupils as having SEN (Gross, 2008; Ofsted, 2010), which will reduce the prevalence of IEPs in schools.

High numbers of IEPs bring issues. SENCOs are overwhelmed with paperwork and teachers are unable to keep up with pupils' targets (Gross, 2008). This prevents IEPs from being the working documents intended (Chapman et al, 2011), and leads them "to become static documents with little impact on progress" (Gross, 2008, p.2). Fewer IEPs should therefore result in better quality IEPs. Additionally, with the move towards "'personalisation' – assessing and planning for the unique needs of every child, not just those identified with SEN or a disability" (Gross, 2008, p. 1) - fewer pupils need IEPs. The education system has developed to become more effective in responding to pupils' varying needs (Chapman et al, 2011). All pupils experience individualised learning, thus most do not need an IEP as their needs are met without identification as having SEN (Ofsted, 2010). This means IEPs are reserved for pupils who need them.

Although the DfES recognise that parents value IEPs, their concern to reduce bureaucracy means that they plan to "remove advice on using IEPs" (2011, p.98) from the new Code of Practice. Chapman et al point out that IEPs can be an effective tool when used well (2011). Therefore under the new approach to SEN, schools can continue to use IEPs, but they are no longer the only possible tool and their use is less directed. This change was precipitated by the DfE's recognition that "Many schools have developed new approaches to planning, reviewing and tracking the progress of all pupils that have enabled them to achieve what IEPs aimed to do without many of the associated bureaucratic burdens." (DfE, 2011, p. 98) The approaches which the DfE acknowledge as effective, "have included new ways of tracking pupil progress, involving pupils in setting their own targets, engaging regularly and effectively with parents, and using individual profiles and provision mapping." (DfE, 2011, pp. 98-99) Much of this sounds like IEPs, but it is a positive step that schools are being allowed to create their own systems, as long as the progress of pupils with SEN is secured.

Pupil involvement is crucial, but it is not a novel idea. The 2001 Code of Practice stated: "Pupils...should, where possible, participate in all the decision-making processes that occur in education including the setting of learning targets and contributing to IEPs" (DfES, 2001b, p. 27). Some pupils do not necessarily have a sufficient understanding of their own ability or theories of cognitive development to set suitable targets, nonetheless it is important to give the learner as much autonomy as possible in order to ensure long-term success (Little, 1996, p. 204). Participation in the setting of targets is a positive step towards this. Although challenges arise with very young children and those with communication issues, the DfES give guidance on the methods which can be used to include these pupils (2001b). Pupils in EYFS make their own educational decisions everyday through continuous provision and child-initiated learning, thus all pupils should be involved in the creation and review of their IEPs, in an age-appropriate manner.

It stands to reason that IEPs must be written by the professional in charge of ensuring the targets are met. Whilst some teachers were involved in formulating IEPs, in the past much of the work was

undertaken by the SENCO. This led to IEPs becoming "too far removed from the teaching process" (Cowne, 2008, p. 21), and SENCOs feeling "swamped by the bureaucracy" (Gross, 2008, p. 1). The role of the SENCO should be in co-ordinating IEPs. In the Green Paper, the DfE urge schools to take advantage of the new freedoms that they are granted, "to reduce the burdens that are currently placed...on SENCOs" (2011, p. 98). Since the needs of children with SEN should be met within the classroom as far as possible, class teachers should generally write IEPs. This approach to SEN is supported by "the international endorsement of inclusive education" (Avramidis and Norwich, 2012, p. 25), which calls for pupils with SEN to be educated within the classrooms of mainstream schools. The DfE acknowledge that there are occasions when interventions are necessary, but point out that they should be time-limited and carried out by experts (2011, p.14). They use speech and language intervention as an example. In this case, the class teacher will not be delivering the intervention, so the intervention teacher, Speech and Language Therapist or Learning Support Assistant (LSA), will be best placed to formulate IEPs.

Analysis

There are limitations to my research. Peer and Reid astutely criticise the "small scale and highly context specific" nature of much education research (2012, p. 27). My research falls into these categories. The size of my sample was very small, since I only collected responses from the ten teachers in the school. Furthermore, whilst there were six Key Stage 1 teachers, there were only four EYFS teachers, none of whom worked in Nursery. This meant that my sample was uneven with regards to EYFS and Key Stage 1, and did not represent Nursery teachers. Ideally I would have carried out large-scale document analysis, which has traditionally been favoured in education research (Peer and Reid, 2012), in addition to a questionnaire. This would have involved cross-referencing IEPs with teachers' plans, as well as accessing data on the progress of pupils with IEPs.

My research would have been improved had I distributed my questionnaire in a number of different schools. This would have served two important purposes – increasing the sample size and reflecting the situation in different contexts. The latter would almost certainly have had an effect on my data, as I have already experienced very different approaches to IEPs in my placement schools. My findings are not very generalisable therefore, and are largely applicable to the school where I was based. Since the school was following DfES guidance, however, the findings may be of value to other schools. Nonetheless, generalisability remains the weakest area of my research.

Indeed the validity of my research is assisted by the specific nature of my pivotal question – How useful do you perceive IEPs to be for informing planning? The specificity of this question guarantees that I measured what I set out to measure (McGrath and Coles, 2013, p. 85). Although teacher perception does not necessarily convey how useful IEPs really are for informing planning, my question guarantees that the participants were aware of exactly what they were being asked – their perception of the effectiveness of IEPs in informing planning.

There were further issues with my research. My method required me to represent teacher perception quantitatively. McGrath and Coles highlight the danger of such analysis – making inadequately founded quantitative claims based on data relating to perceptions (2013, p. 79). The necessity of this semi-quantitative approach was practical. Closed questions minimised the length of time which the questionnaire took to complete, thereby maximising the participation rate. This ultimately resulted in a strength of my research, securing a 100% return rate on my questionnaires. This ensured the largest possible data set and enhanced the reliability of my findings. Furthermore the semi-quantitative approach, which was necessitated by my closed questions, provided me with data which was relatively easy to handle; clear comparisons could be made between the participants' responses, and percentages could be generated easily. However, these closed questions meant that the data generated appeared quantitative, despite its qualitative nature.

McGrath and Coles are again astute when they note that, "It is really important that teachers disseminate their research to colleagues." (2013, p. 11) In order to ensure the reliability of my data, I did not share my findings with anyone at the school. This confidentiality ensured that I followed BERA's guidelines in respecting the rights of the participants (2011, p.4). It was intended to increase the reliability of my findings. Since all questionnaires were anonymous and responses were not shared with the Senior Management Team, participants could be sure that there would be no negative repercussions for them. The unfortunate effect of this choice is that my research will bring about less positive change than if I had shared my findings. There is a difficult balance to be struck between ensuring the reliability of data and maximising its impact.

Furthermore, in formulating my questionnaire, I had to make assumptions about what affects the usefulness of IEPs. This meant that I took some of my own opinions into the research, and makes my approach more deductive than inductive. As a result, I may have overlooked some factors which influence the effectiveness of IEPs for informing planning. However, if I had not incorporated questions based on pre-conceived connections, I would have been unable to gather sufficient background information to help me interpret the data and plan an intervention.

Figure 1

How useful do you perceive IEPs to be for informing planning?	Very Useful	Quite Useful	Not Very Useful	Not At All Useful
Number of respondents	0	6	4	0

Whilst none of the participants perceived IEPs to be useless, none of the EYFS or Key Stage 1 teachers whom I asked found IEPs very useful. This leads me to an exploration of which factors affect this perception and what could be done to increase the usefulness of IEPs.

Figure 2

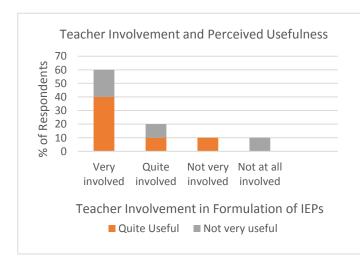


Figure 2 indicates that the level of involvement which teachers have in formulating IEPs has some effect on their perceived usefulness. The relationship between these two factors is not overwhelming, but two thirds of those teachers who were very involved in the formulation of IEPs saw them as quite useful for informing planning, rather than not very useful.

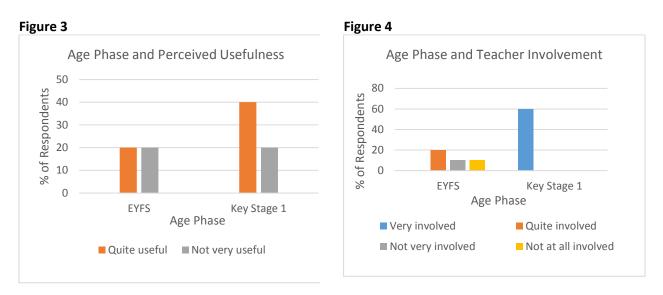


Figure 3 suggests a slight increase in the perceived usefulness of IEPs in Key Stage 1 over EYFS. One possible explanation for this is that teacher involvement in formulating IEPs slightly increases their usefulness in informing planning. Figure 4 shows that 100% of Key Stage 1 teachers identified themselves as very involved in the formulation of IEPs, whereas no EYFS teachers identified themselves in this way. This supports the idea that IEPs are most effective when closely linked to the teaching process (Cowne, 2008).

Figure 5

Year Group	Year R	Year 1	Year 2
Mean Number of IEPs per Class	7.25	6	6

A surprising finding of my research concerns the relative number of IEPs in EYFS and Key Stage 1. As Gross suggests, personalised learning decreases the necessity of IEPs (2008, p. 4). Since "a key task of the early childhood educator is to...build on each child's existing competences and plan for their future learning" (Fisher, 2013, p. 5), EYFS can be seen to be more child-centred in its approach to education than Key Stage 1. Since this is the case, it follows that there would be fewer IEPs for children in EYFS. However, Figure 5 shows that on average there were more IEPs in Reception classes.

Myers et al provide one possible explanation for this ... In the school where I carried out my research, the majority of IEPs in EYFS were for speech and language. These issues are often identified and addressed at an early stage of education, because: "early preventative interventions focussing on language and communication can have beneficial outcomes ..." (Myers et al, 2005, p. 3) The interventions in the school where I was based were generally completed within the Reception year, hence the reduction in IEPs thereafter. Interestingly, the speech and language intervention in the school is not carried out by the class teachers, but by Learning Support Assistants (LSAs). This may explain the low level of teacher involvement in EYFS and help to explain why the teachers in this age phase found IEPs less useful than in Key Stage 1.

This fact also explains the findings of my document analysis, in which I cross-referenced my mentor's plans with the IEPs of pupils in my class. I found that none of them incorporated anything from the IEPs. However all eleven IEPs were for speech; they were therefore planned for by an LSA, who taught the pupils outside the classroom.

Figure 6



As Figure 6 shows, 90% of the participants said that they consulted their IEPs only half termly, with the remaining 10% consulting them less frequently. This indicates two things: the school's policy of reviewing IEPs on a half termly basis ensures that teachers consult them consistently; and in their current form, IEPs are not particularly useful for informing daily or weekly planning, otherwise teachers would consult them more frequently. Given the emphasis placed on pupil particpation in the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2001, pp.27-31), it is surprising

that none of the IEPs for pupils in Reception classes had anything written in the box entitled 'Pupil's view', and that only one of the pupils in Key Stage 1 had filled in this box. The level of ownership which the children had of the IEPs was therefore minimal. This may explain why the IEPs were not as effective as they could have been.

Conclusions

My research suggests that teachers do not perceive IEPs to be very useful in informing planning, with the majority only consulting them as frequently as the school policy dictated. If policy dictated that the IEPs were to be consulted on a daily or weekly basis, this may lead to an increase in their perceived usefulness. It also shows that in the school where I was based, a different approach was taken to IEPs in the EYFS than in Key Stage 1. Teachers were not involved in the creation of IEPs for pupils in EYFS, whereas in Key Stage 1 it was entirely the teacher's responsibility. This was due to the different type of need which was identified in children in EYFS – almost exclusively speech and language – and the fact that this was dealt with through an intervention carried out by an LSA.

A reduction in the number of IEPs would appear to help with their perceived usefulness. It would ensure that only pupils who really needed IEPs would have them, as well as giving teachers more time to look at the IEPs of pupils in their class. This would then increase the likelihood of pupils' targets being incorporated into teachers' plans, rather than just being reviewed every half term. It is important to note that whilst overall numbers of IEPs should be kept to a minimum (Gross 2008; Ofsted 2010), it is probably fair for the number of children with IEPs in EYFS to be greater. This is only the case as long as the majority of IEPs relate to speech and language interventions, as these interventions are extremely important and effective.

My research also suggests that teacher involvement in creating IEPs helps teachers' perceptions of their effectiveness. Whoever is responsible for ensuring that pupils meet the targets on their IEPs, is the person who should create the IEP. Except in the case of interventions, this will be the class teacher. Continued teacher involvement in creating IEPs is therefore important. On its own, however, it is not sufficient to cause teachers to perceive IEPs to be very useful.

My planned intervention therefore consists of two factors. Along with a reduction in the number of IEPs, my research suggests that increased pupil involvement in target setting would aid the effectiveness of IEPs. These two factors constitute my planned intervention. Whether or not schools

continue to call the documents IEPs now that the new approach to SEN has been introduced, the incorporation of these two elements into provision for pupils with SEN will remain important in ensuring pupil progress.

As a result of my research, I have a greater understanding of how IEPs are used effectively. I also have a better grasp of the similarities and differences between the use of IEPs in EYFS and Key Stage 1. This has given me a good grounding in how to plan for and monitor the progress of pupils with SEN in my chosen age phase. I have also become more familiar with the 2001 SEN Code of Practice, the Draft SEN Code of Practice and the Green Paper. All of these have given me insight into the way that I should provide for pupils with SEN in my class. I have discovered the importance of early identification of SEN, and gained a great deal of insight into how common speech and language issues are for pupils in EYFS.

Through this project I have also gained insight into action research, which is described by Milton-Brkich et al as the "most efficient and effective" CPD that teachers can undertake (2010, p. 51). It has become clear how important it is to manage change within the teaching profession. September 2014 brought dramatic changes to the education system, with the introduction of a new National Curriculum, a new approach to SEN, and a new EYFS Statutory Framework. Education is everchanging, and this project has given me some of the tools which I will need to manage change and development in the teaching profession.

In terms of the implications for my practice, these will depend slightly upon which age-phase I am working in. Wherever I am based, I must be extremely committed to providing differentiated work that will be accessible to a majority of pupils in my class. This will minimise the number of pupils who need to be identified as having SEN. Personalised approaches to learning will help me to operate an Inclusive classroom in which all pupils can make progress (Gross, 2008, p.1). Because I will aim to meet most of the needs of my pupils within the classroom, I will need to be heavily involved in the formulation of plans for children with SEN. I will also need to ensure that I work with the SENCO to identify when an intervention is necessary (DfE, 2013, p. 74). I must make then sure that I am aware of what is in the plans for the intervention and that I am available to support the other professionals involved. In this way I can help all children in my class to make progress. I would certainly be interested in carrying out further research into SEN practice in EYFS and Key Stage 1.

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