Introduction

Individual education plans (IEPs) have been adopted in many countries as a means of ensuring that a focus is maintained upon the specific learning needs of individual pupils described as having special educational needs (Rodger 1995; Meijer 2003; National Disability Authority 2005; Takala, Pirtimaa & Törmänen 2009). In addition they have been promoted as a means of enabling teachers to make adaptations to lesson planning and the curriculum in order to take account of the needs of individuals and to ensure that they gain access to learning alongside their peers (Ryndak 1996; Loreman, Deppeler & Harvey 2010). In many administrations the use of individual education planning is directly linked to legislation which has established the implementation of IEPs as a requirement for pupils who have a formal assessment of special educational needs. For example, in England the Special Needs Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills 2001) requires that:-

> Strategies employed to enable the child to progress should be recorded within an individual education plan (IEP); this should include information about the short term targets set for the child, the teaching strategies and provision to be put in place, when the plan is to be reviewed, and the outcome of the action taken. (paragraph 4:27 page 37)

Similarly, in the USA the IEP is seen as a significant document that ensures "full education opportunities" for individuals who may be vulnerable and require the protection of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (United States Department of Education 1997) that was revised in 2004. In New Zealand the 'Special Education 2000 Framework' (Ministry of Education 2004), introduced in 1996 identified the principles of IEP planning and listed content requirement that would enable all pupils with SEN to access the school Curriculum established for all learners. Similar provision for IEPs is made within the legislation of other administrations including for example, the Australian states (Forlin 2001), in Canada (Dworet & Bennett 2002), and the Netherlands (Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld & Karsten 2001)

Such requirements have resulted in the development of a significant number of models and formats for IEPs that have been adopted at school, regional or national levels (United States Department of Education 2004; Rose & Byers 2004). There has also been an increase in literature discussing elements of good practice in the management of the IEP process (Lytle & Bordin 2001; Poppes, Vlaskamp, de Geeter & Nakken 2002; Goepel 2009) that has placed an emphasis upon issues of parent and pupil participation, multi-disciplinary collaboration and effective systems of reviewing targets.

Within the Republic of Ireland the development of IEPs has been an emergent process rather than one driven by legislation. It is generally accepted that Ireland is a relative newcomer to developing IEPs for pupils with assessed special educational needs in mainstream schools compared to its international counterparts. Until recently extensive evidence of IEPs was principally located within a number of special schools which have established individual education planning as a core component of their provision for pupils with special educational needs (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). However, with the rapid increase in mainstreaming of children with special educational needs, policy makers and legislators decided that individual education planning should be mandated through legislation. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Oireachtas, 2004) proposed the implementation of IEPs and offered a blueprint for development but as yet, due to

economic constraints, requirements for schools to introduce a system of IEPs have not been implemented. This failure to enact the provisions regarding individual education planning has lessened the impact of the EPSEN Act in ensuring that this process becomes an established feature of provision in all mainstream schools. Investigations into the development and deployment of IEPs in an Irish context have been limited in scope, often presenting single school case studies or reporting practice for discrete pupil populations (Nugent, 2002; Ring & Travers, 2005). The research reported in this article endeavoured to establish a broader national picture of individual education planning and to collect data from a range of perspectives (teachers, parents, pupils and other professionals) in order to ascertain the ways in which IEPS are currently emerging within the Irish primary school system. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Oireachtas 2004) proposed the implementation of IEPs and offered a blueprint for development but as yet requirements for schools to introduce a system of IEPs has not been implemented

Research Methods

Visits were made to ten primary schools across Ireland. The schools were randomly selected using a sampling matrix that took account of demographic variables, including school size, location (urban and rural) and type (Roman Catholic National School, Non- Denominational Educate Together and Irish medium Gael Scoil). Each school was visited twice during a two year period by two researchers and each visit lasted for two days. In the case of the Gael Scoil visits were made by researchers who were proficient in the Irish language, though interviews were conducted in English. During these visits data were collected through a process of individual semi-structured interviews with key respondents, and a scrutiny of school documents which were taken for analysis (see sample frame in table 1 below). Interviewees were selected for their distinct roles as service providers (school principals, teachers, special needs assistants, health service professionals) or service users (parents, pupils) in order to gain insights into the influence of policy and provision in relation to special educational needs and to understand the experiences provided to pupils and the outcomes of these actions. When pupils were involved they were always interviewed in the presence of a known adult with the researchers using child-friendly approaches that included the use of familiar objects, pictures and a focus on pupil identified areas of interest (Lewis 2002; Deatrick & Ledlie 2000).

The data collection process focused upon a wide range of issues in relation to individual pupils, schools and national policy, but for the purposes of this paper use has been made only of that data directly pertaining to the development and use of individual education plans.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were then subjected to a categorical coding process that enabled the researchers to identify recurring themes and to describe common and exceptional features of phenomena identified by respondents (Creswell 2002). Coding was conducted by two researchers independently with the codes derived from this process then being compared to ensure consistency of interpretation. On those occasions when a mismatch of interpretation and coding was identified the appropriate sections of the transcript were revisited and discussed with a third researcher. Where no clear interpretation emerged the data was not used in order to ensure that only that which could be deemed trustworthy informed interpretation (Kvale

1994). Where issues emerged from interview transcripts this was, wherever possible, further verified by reference to documentation that included examples of IEPs, policy documents, school reports and guidelines issued by the individual schools. These documents were systematically scrutinised through extraction of excerpts, quotations and passages organised under themes related to IEPs, individual planning and target setting for pupils in order to identify common factors that could be directly related to data extracted from the interviews (Labuschagne 2003; Bowen 2009) Issues relating to IEPs during the first round of visits to schools were further verified through focused questioning and a further document scrutiny during the subsequent visit.

Findings

Despite the fact that IEPs are not required through legislation in Irish schools all of the primary schools visited had introduced them, though their level of development and sophistication varied considerably. Six of the ten schools had developed policies for the management of IEPs. Some school documentation does make specific reference to *Special Educational Needs: A continuum of Support* (DES 2007) which was issued by the Department of Education and Science and offers advice on planning for individual pupil needs and the maintenance of pupil records of progress and attainment. However, the non-statutory status of this advisory document is such that its influence has not permeated all of the schools visited.

Where IEPs are in place they do not always follow a consistent format even within an individual school. However, where schools have been operating a system of individual education planning for some time it appears more likely that a whole school approach will be adopted. In this respect it was noticeable that after a two year period when the researchers made second visits to schools in some cases the IEP management system had developed a greater level of sophistication and consistency of use. As an example of development in this area school 5 at the time of the first visit had begun to develop IEPs and staff were experimenting with format and content. By the time of the second visit the school had developed a standardised form of IEP which included provision of targets with clearly stated achievement criteria and an indication of resource needs. An appraisal of pupil progress was clearly identified in a summary section of the document and the use of hand written annotations, such as those indicating modification to targets and notes on resources gave evidence that these were working documents rather than tokens established to indicate good practice.

In some schools there was evidence of innovation such as the use of "group IEPs" by school 2. In this school pupils with similar learning needs had been identified and grouped together sometimes with a common target on which they were encouraged to work collaboratively. These were additional to individual targets set within pupil's personalised IEPs. Reference to IEPs is at times made in other school policy documents. As an example of this the behaviour policy adopted by school 9 indicates that it may be necessary to provide targets specifically related to pupil behaviour within IEPs.

Attitudes towards the development and use of IEPS had certainly changed in some instances and this had occurred largely on the basis of teachers having worked to develop systems over a period of time. The principal of school 1 commented that:-

> *"I think they were probably, you know… they were initially seen as a bureaucratic necessity to keep our friends the inspectors happy if they came in. Whereas I do think now, you know because teachers and resource teachers are more used to doing them and because there's*

been a change over in class, that I think there's a greater… I think we're all buying in to them a bit more, that they are the guidelines for children's learning. And I think I can see the benefit of them more now than I did when they were brought in first. I have to say that we were probably, well we weren't brought kicking and screaming, but we did it because we had to do it. Whereas now I think they're done because people see there's a benefit."

This comment, which was made by the principal of a school that has no formal policy for the development of IEPs is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly it implies that IEPs are a required element of planning for pupils with SEN, whereas they continue to have no statutory status or requirement. Secondly, it is indicated that they have become an expectation of the school inspectorate, though the research team were unable to find evidence of this within the whole school evaluation reports written following school inspection visits. However, a more interesting indication is that some schools, having initially adopted individual education planning with some reluctance, now see these as a useful tool that is of benefit to pupils.

Whilst the principal of school 1 was able to articulate the benefits of IEPs as he perceived them, it is clear that it has been less easy to convince some teachers a resource teacher in school 5 commented:-

"I have to co-ordinate drawing up IEPs and there's a certain resistance to that because, with funding and all of that, some people are of the opinion that we haven't been given training, the legislation hasn't been enacted fully, and on the one part we're supposed to be having parents in and having support from home, and support from all the various experts, and yet in a lot of cases we're left on our own with these children."

The uncertainty with regards to the status or value of the IEP process in this example is clearly related to the issues of training and resource allocation. A feeling that if a pupil has an IEP that indicates resource needs or teaching approaches it needs to be backed up with practical support for the teacher charged with its delivery was a recurring theme in the data. Similarly a lack of direction in terms of appropriate format and content appears to have resulted in conflicting views about how these documents might be developed. As an example, the principal of school 8 was of the opinion that:-

"You have to have an IEP, you need to focus on what the needs are, but it doesn't need to be ten pages long, you know. One page can be fine, you know."

IEPs seen by the research team did vary considerably in detail and format. Some contained detailed descriptions of the pupil's individual needs, well defined targets with assessment criteria, identified resources and a direct link to curriculum opportunities. Whereas others simply listed a set of targets to be reviewed after a period of time.

In a few instances the IEPs were clearly seen as working documents referred to on a regular basis and modified as the need arose. As a resource teacher from school 3 commented:-

"Well, first of all I suppose the most important thing for us is that we put children's needs first, ok. And like that, for example, when we draw up their IEP, we always talk about that as being a working document, and that the target that we might have set today might not necessarily… might need to be adjusted in a couple of weeks or so."

A scrutiny of the documents from this school did indeed indicate that the IEPs were being used to aid planning for individual pupils and to influence lesson planning. The IEPs were covered in dated notes and annotations related to targets, resources and teaching approaches.

Some school staff (schools 2, 5 & 9) had received training specifically related to the development of IEPs, this usually being provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS).Where this was the case schools were seen to be more likely to have adopted specific formats for IEPs and to implement them in a more cohesive manner within the school. In school 2 a support teacher observed:-

> *"Based on a course that [a colleague] and I did last year on IEPs, we then put together our own template as a school for doing IEPs."*

It was noticeable that the IEPs in this school were both detailed and consistent in format.

Involvement in planning

The effective process of developing and monitoring IEPs has been described as one of partnership between a number of interested parties including teachers, parents, support professionals and the individual pupil concerned (Drasgow, Yell & Robinson 2001; Robertson & Cornwall 2004). Whilst the production of IEPs remains largely within the remit of schools, a failure to involve other professional colleagues or parents can have the effect of diminishing the impact of the IEP as a means of effecting and monitoring change in the individual pupil (Stroggilos & Xanthacou 2006; Tennant 2007). Within the schools visited participation in the IEP process varied considerably from one in which all the professionals who are concerned for the education and welfare of the individual child were fully consulted and involved to a situation in which school staff developed, monitored and assessed IEPs with minimal consultation (see table 2). In all of the schools visited teachers with specific designation for the management of special educational needs (Resource and Support Teachers) played the leading role in the development of the plans and in most schools they did so through a consultation with class teachers who had day to day responsibility for the individual pupil concerned. Where this was formalised regular meetings between specialist and class teachers were held during which targets were reviewed and modified. However, in many instances meetings between teaching staff were infrequent and informal in nature and tended to be based upon a general discussion of the pupil rather than a detailed analysis related to the IEP. The comment from a teacher in school 1 typifies many that were obtained during the data gathering process.

> *"I worked out an individual education plan with the resource teacher and myself and made out a plan for him, and I suppose we concentrated more on the social, because that's what we felt he needed, and as I said, we were always aware of course that the learning is the important thing in the class situation."*

In all of the schools visited a focus upon social development was a feature of IEP planning with decisions regarding pupil priorities being made by teaching staff and generally in isolation from other interested parties.

> *"Basically its myself [support teacher] and the two teachers who work with her* [pupil]*"*
>   support teacher school 10

There were examples where schools were endeavouring to make the IEP development process more inclusive and collaborative. In this respect the involvement of special needs assistants (SNAs) was particularly interesting. In the Irish education system SNAs fulfil a care role that within legislation has no pedagogical duties. However, in all of the schools visited there were examples of them being directly involved in learning through working with individual pupils or small groups. In four of the schools their opinions were sought with regards to the pupils' needs through the IEP planning process. For example a teacher from school 4 informed the researchers that:-

> "It's not just me. There's a group of us. So there's myself and his SNA and the special needs teacher and the resource teacher and then we meet every term to do up his IEP. And then we see what he's Achieved so far from the previous one, and then we work on what his new targets are."

This level of involvement was confirmed during interviews with 5 SNAs in the school. However, in the majority of the schools (6/10) SNAs played no role in IEP planning despite being closely involved in the delivery of teaching programmes.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Whilst the use of the IEP as a focus for the discussion of individual pupil needs between teaching staff is an emerging trend across the schools, the level of involvement of parents in the development and monitoring process varies considerably. The interviews conducted reveal that schools have made efforts to involve parents but that the level of their participation and awareness is inconsistent. With the exception of only one school it was suggested by interviewees that parents were considered to have an important role in the IEP process and indeed there was documentary evidence that this was generally seen as a necessary practice to be addressed within the schools. However, it was often the case that whilst some parents were fully involved in development, target setting and monitoring procedures, within the same school others were not so fully engaged. In some schools it appears that the level of participation is dependent upon individual teachers and their relationship with parents, rather than being a consistently applied school procedure.

Some parents felt that the school was fully committed to the participation of parents in the IEP process and that their opinions and input was valued. An example of this level of participation was given by the parent of a child with autism spectrum disorder in school 6:-

> "It's usually done with teachers, parents, principal, SNA. So you've full involvement from the word go. And I would say with the system they have in the autistic unit, you're kept up to date constantly with it [IEP]. And really it's tailored to the child's need, because even though I have three children on the spectrum, they couldn't be more different from each other. You know, personality wise and academically and what their challenges are or what they need to be challenged at. So it's usually about twice a year you would have meetings, and maybe at the start of the year, October, November, once they've settled in. You'll have a plan going forward and then March, April, kind of a review."

This parent clearly had a positive view of the IEP development and review process and had been involved at every stage. A similar experience was described by a parent from school 3, though in this

case it would appear that she had been informed about the IEP rather than involved in its development:-

> "They generated and IEP. I went in and I had a meeting with the various staff, including his class teacher, his special needs teacher and the lady who looks after resources and we had a half hour discussion, which was useful. They took me through what they had written and the purpose of the report [IEP]."

In school four where there were plans in place, parents were either aware of this but had not participated in development or review, or in some instances were unaware of the existence of IEPs.

> "I don't come across, what did you call them? An IEP, and education plan"

> "No, I am not actually involved in meeting to decide what should go into the plan".

Pupil involvement

The involvement of pupils in planning and evaluation is far from straightforward. Examples of effective involvement do exist (Shotton 2003; Rose & Shevlin 2010) though many of these are based around research and development with older pupils in secondary schools (Pearson 2000; Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky 2004). Avoidance of tokenism and developing an understanding of the objectives of pupil involvement are important elements here. It was therefore not surprising to discover that just 2 of the 10 schools had given much consideration to how this might be achieved.

In school 3 one pupil was able to describe how he was involved in a discussion about his targets within his IEP. The same pupil knew that when the targets had been agreed the teacher typed them on the computer and printed them This was exceptional and possibly reflects the current position in respect of the uncertainty surrounding the development of IEPs in the Irish education system.

Conclusions

Although there is no requirement for schools in Ireland to provide IEPs for pupils with special educational needs this has become an established practice. Teachers and other professionals see that IEPs can be a valuable vehicle for ensuring that a focus upon individual needs is maintained and addressed. However, there is inconsistency with regards to the approaches taken to develop and manage the IEP process that may be directly related to a lack of clear legislative guidance in this area. The fact that IEPs are emerging as a tool that is valued by principals and teachers may be important as educational administrators in Ireland consider the next stages of seeing the recommendations contained within documents such as the EPSEN Act through to implementation. There are clear examples of innovation within schools that could provide the basis of new initiatives in support of the wider special educational needs planning process. Whilst schools have adopted diverse interpretations of the IEP system, they are already demonstrating a reflective and experimental approach to developing the means of supporting individual pupils.

Where IEPs are in place they are largely initiated and led by teachers who are developing their own confidence in the process and devising approaches that are well suited to their specific teaching situations. An emphasis upon IEPs as a teacher led process is not unlike that reported from elsewhere (Cowne 2005; Frankl 2005) in administrations where the process has been in place for

some time and in part reflects the complexity of co-ordinating approaches across a range of interested parties. Where there is a determination to see IEPs as a means of ensuring consistency of teaching approaches with individual pupils, this can in itself act as a catalyst for increased collaboration and may be a means of bringing professionals and families together to find common solutions to shared concerns (Clark 2000). Opportunities to learn from the challenges and solutions provided in countries where IEPs have been in use for some years may well enable Irish schools to avoid some of the pitfalls and difficulties experienced elsewhere.

Whilst there has been a general acceptance of the use of IEPs as a means of planning, monitoring and assessment of achievement and progress they have not been without their critics. Cooper (1996) suggests that the quality of IEPs is dependent upon a number of factors including the accuracy of assessment data used to identify individual needs, the ability to involve parents and pupils effectively in the process and the contextualisation of IEPs into whole school planning and delivery of the curriculum. Each of these challenges has been identified within the research here reported. An opportunity exists to consider each of these as teachers in Irish schools further their investigation into the use of IEPs in primary schools.

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Table 1 Interviews conducted during two visits to each of ten primary schools

School	Interviewees (number of interviews)					
	Principal	Teacher	Resource/Support Teacher	Parent	Pupil	Special Needs Assistant
1	2	6	8	12	6	7
2	2	10	9	12	9	1
3	1	13	7	12	12	8
4	1	10	7	8	10	5
5	0	15	11	12	14	6
6	2	7	6	7	9	3

7	4	11	8	7	7	4
8	2	3	5	4	9	2
9	2	10	3	8	7	3
10	3	11	7	10	8	1
Interviews N=	19	96	71	92	91	40
Total Number of interviews = 409						

Table 2: IEP management in 10 Irish Primary Schools

School	Type	Location	POL	TI	RST I	PAI	SNA	PUI	OPI
1	NS	Rural		√	√	√	√		
2	NS	Rural	√	√	√	√			
3	NS	Rural	√	√	√	√		√	
4	NS	Urban	√	√	√		√		√

			POL	TI	RSTI	PAI	SNAI	PUI	OPI
5	NS	Urban		√	√	√	√	√	
6	NS	Rural		√	√	√			
7	GS	Urban		√	√	√			√
8	ET	Rural	√		√	√			√
9	NS	Urban	√	√	√	√			
10	NS	Rural	√	√	√	√	√		

Table 2 Key: POL – IEP Policy in place;

TI – Teacher involved in IEP planning

RSTI- Resource or Support Teacher involved in IEP planning

PAI – Parent involved in IEP planning

SNAI – Special Needs Assistant involved in planning

PUI – Pupil involved in IEP planning

OPI – Other professional (e.g speech therapist) involved in IEP planning