



Individual Education Plans/Personal Learning Plans: Time for a Change of Approach?

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With over 67,000 pupils on SEN registers in Northern Ireland and an alarming growth in the number of statements (now over 5%), is it time to question the current SEN approach in schools and the extent of the ongoing SEN review? Below, Dr John Hunter, Dr Noel Purdy and Lois Totton outline the history and background to the Individual Education Plan in particular before offering a critique of current practice and a glimpse into what the post-Covid future might hold under the new SEN proposals.

Having initially crossed the North Atlantic from the US to become a requirement of the 1994 Code of Practice in England (DfE 1994), the Individual Education Plan was first outlined in Northern Ireland in the 1998 Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (Code of Practice) which remains (at the time of writing) the core guidance to which schools must have regard under The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. The Code of Practice makes it clear that at Stage 2 (of the five-stage model) the SENCo has responsibility for drawing up the IEP in collaboration with the class teacher(s), taking into account “as far as possible” the child’s own views, and advising parents of the action they need to take at home to support its implementation. While the purpose of the IEP is not set out explicitly in the 1998 guidance, there is a focus throughout the Code on enabling children with special educational needs to have “the greatest possible access to a broad and balanced curriculum, including the Northern Ireland Curriculum” (§1.6 Principles of the Code). The guidance further states (§2.57) that the IEP should be structured to include:

- the nature of the child’s learning difficulties;
- the special educational provision required, including staff involved, frequency of support and any specific programmes, activities, materials or equipment;

- the nature of the support required from parents at home;
- the targets to be achieved in a given time;
- any pastoral care or medical requirements;
- the monitoring and assessment arrangements;
- the review arrangements and date.

Research into the effectiveness of IEPs across the UK over the past quarter of a century has highlighted potential strengths but also many shortcomings: as early as 1996 and in light of concerns about their practicability and implementation, Cooper posed the question ‘Are Individual Education Plans a waste of paper?’ (Cooper, 1996). Three years later Tod (1999) highlighted that more work needed to be done to ensure effective target setting, appropriate teaching strategies and monitoring progress. In the same year Wedell (1999), reporting on issues raised in the SENCo-Forum, noted that teachers in secondary schools found it very difficult to pay adequate attention to the individual targets of large numbers of pupils across different classes, and some SENCOs had even started writing group IEPs as a result. With some justification Wedell refers to this group approach to an individual plan as a ‘contradiction in terms’. Closer to home, Quinn (2012) similarly found post-primary teachers in Northern Ireland were supportive of the concept of the IEP but were struggling to cope with the sheer volume of targets for numerous pupils across multiple classes. At a primary level in a small-scale study Goepel (2009) considered the level of partnership in one mainstream junior school class (year 6) in England, and found that, despite the guidance provided in the (English) Code of Practice and the Assessment for Learning principles of pupil involvement in their learning, there was an inconsistent pattern of communication and collaboration between teachers, parents and children. Where communication and co-construction were absent, there was evidence of confusion, misunderstanding and pupil disengagement. Although recent research evidence around IEPs in the UK is scarce, there is no indication that IEPs are any more effective today than at any other point since their introduction. Indeed, as recently as 2017, and echoing Wedell’s reporting of SENCOs’ concerns from almost 20 years earlier, Wearmouth acknowledges that complying with IEP procedures can be “very time-intensive” (p.77) for teachers, and notes that some SENCOs in England have “dispensed with” IEPs altogether and are using group plans instead.

In Northern Ireland the post-2015 legacy from the five separate Education and Library Boards (ELBs) means that schools across each board area have been using different IEP templates with no standardised approach. There was also considerable disparity in how staff training needs were addressed between ELB areas, with only some SENCOs receiving training on writing IEPs and using SMART targets, resulting in an inconsistent approach to delivery and execution of the plans. Not surprisingly, therefore, the recent damning Impact Review of Special Educational Needs published by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO, 2020) highlights the need for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) to ensure that, moving forward, there is a clear and consistent approach to identifying

and providing for children with SEN, for which there is currently “no evidence” (p.2).

So why persist with and/or simply tweak the existing IEP model which has presented numerous challenges from the outset? Is it time instead to consider a radically different approach?

A New SEN Legislative and Policy Framework

The opportunity for radical change may, however, already have passed. Within the new SEN framework (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (NI) 2016 (SEND Act)), it is a statutory duty for each school to “prepare and keep under review a programme of special educational provision (a “personal learning plan”) in respect of each registered pupil at the school who has special educational needs” (Article 3c), and to seek consent (from the pupil or their parents) for this plan to be transferred if and when a child moves from one school to another.

A public consultation on the long-awaited new SEN Code of Practice opened on 30 September 2020 and will close on 22 December 2020. The new Code of Practice proposes three stages of Special Educational Provision, as opposed to the former five stage model. Moreover, a Personal Learning Plan (PLP) will be required at each of the three stages (replacing the IEP) and will be subject to “regular review”. For the first time PLP templates have been provided: for pupils in Nursery in a Primary setting, Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools, which should ensure greater consistency of format and approach across all settings.

The new Primary PLP for example (published alongside the consultation) is structured in the following way:

- Part 1 - Personal Profile which includes the views of the child and their parents, details of current Special Educational Provision (featuring a note on the extent of resulting improvement) and a record of where the PLP has been shared (e.g. with EA or another school)
- Part 2 - School Assessments (results of standardised tests e.g. NFER, PTM, PTE etc.)
- Part 3 – Learning and Evaluation Plan which includes Pupil Expected Outcomes with details of the proposed strategies/provision, monitoring arrangements, and a section to record the evaluation of the outcomes.

In terms of professional development for staff, it is understood that the Education Authority plans to begin training for Learning Support Co-ordinators (the new term to be adopted to replace “SENCOs”) on the PLP process in the near future, although the current pandemic situation has delayed this. Learning Support Co-ordinators will subsequently provide in-house training and support within their respective schools.

However, while the move towards greater consistency of IEP/PLP format is welcome, we would contend that the new framework does little more than tinker with the old system, changing terminology, revising the paperwork, but retaining the same underlying and flawed principles and largely unworkable approach as before.

Endless Paperwork, Bureaucratic Compliance...

Following the creation of policies and principles relating to the concept of the IEP/ILP as detailed above, it becomes clear that the essential problem with the current IEP and proposed PLP model is that in their desire and commitment to comply with the SEN legislative requirements, schools run the risk of losing sight of what they are actually trying to achieve in the first place.

In essence, most SEN provision follows a consistent pattern of whole school screening, identification of need and allocation of resources to meet those identified needs. In developing IEPs the focus has been placed on the learner and how they perform at a general level of achievement. Consequently, schools have evolved a special education structure which relies mainly on ease of use, 'a fit in or bolt on' approach. An unfortunate consequence of this practice is the establishment of a bureaucracy of compliance designed to put in place a whole school structure to which staff and parents can have regard. In this instance prioritising the individual child's needs and ensuring access to the curriculum have been seen as the priorities, but, as the NIAO (2020) report confirms, this has increasingly been set within a context of swelling SEN registers, creaking internal structures, inadequate resourcing, increasing delays and endless paperwork.

However, while no one could doubt that the needs of the individual child are important, nor that accessing the curriculum is vital, these twin areas of focus have obscured the fundamental, often overlooked need to raise the quality of whole-class teaching. Analysis of what is effective teaching is often absent in routine SEN practices and in IEPs/PLPs. The experience of schools in establishing a special education system has been to nominate a specialist or interested teacher to create a register of need, usually a list of pupils and their identified learning difficulties. From this, an extensive range of ideas is suggested to enable the teacher to shorten the learning content into smaller chunks. In doing so the emphasis on small steps has overtaken the consideration of how to teach effectively in a mixed ability setting. With growing numbers of pupils on the SEN register, numerous individual targets, and countless individual learning strategies, it is little wonder that evidence highlights teachers often feeling overwhelmed.

Rebalancing the Principles

While the recent lockdown and ongoing challenges of 'restarting' school during a pandemic has preoccupied hearts and minds, the needs of our most vulnerable

learners should not be overlooked; nor should we forget just how painstakingly slow the ongoing SEN Review process has been thus far: the latest public consultation on the Code of Practice comes over 11 years after the first consultation on the SEN Review was published in August 2009 (DE, 2009).

So, as we finally re-focus our attention on special educational needs, the question arises as to whether the current direction of SEN policy will continue to take teachers' eyes off the ball by having them focus solely on individual access to the curriculum by means of myriad individual learning strategies, with little or no regard to evidence-based effective whole-class mixed-ability teaching? Evidence cited above would suggest that teachers are understandably struggling with the former approach, resulting in the inconsistency of provision identified by the recent Audit Office Impact Review (NIAO, 2020). We argue here that it is time for a radical re-think and a more realistic re-balancing of priorities between the needs of the individual learner and the need for effective teaching led by a skilled teacher within a whole-class learning environment.

The statutory requirement to prepare an IEP remains the main evidence of compliance with regulations, and this looks likely to continue with the advent of the PLP in Northern Ireland. However, the focal point is the need to rethink the emphasis schools place on compliance and consider a more balanced set of principles to ensure more effective mixed-ability whole-class teaching. Tracking how students learn by measuring the impact of the quality of teaching is crucial to this endeavour and can be achieved by placing more emphasis on the quality of teaching which enables children to learn and feel confident to do so. In conclusion, it is our contention that well-resourced, readily accessible training should focus on how teaching can be actively enriched to help all children (including those with special educational needs) to learn more effectively together.

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