Education essays - special education need pupils

Do Individual Education plans help or hinder the full inclusion of special education need pupils in mainstream schools?

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are required under current DfES guidance for all special education needs (SEN) pupils in the UK. Nearly two million British pupils are estimated to have some sort of special education need, approximately seventeen per cent of all pupils (Russell 2003, DfES 2005). These special educational needs include a wide range of difficulties, such as a physical disability, a hearing or visual impairment, a serious medical condition of some type, and/or behavioural, emotional, communication, and/or social problems (DfES 2005).

Government guidance since the publication of the Warnock Report in 1978 has more and more encouraged the inclusion of SEN pupils in mainstream schools, and all but three percent are taught there (Potts 1995, DfES 2005). This concept of inclusion is part of a broader human rights movement that views segregation in general as morally wrong (Avramidis et al 2000). From this standpoint, inclusion is not simply about making sure the SEN child is taught effectively. Rather, it is about the quality of his or her educational experience as a whole, how he or she is assisted in learning at full potential and full participation in the life of the school (DfES 2005).

As such, the IEP system should contribute to the full inclusion and participation of SEN pupils in the schools they attend. However, whilst IEPs do provide some help for those with special education needs, they are not the most beneficial means to full inclusion in the mainstream schools.

First, IEPs should allow everyone in a school to be informed of the existence and nature of a child's special education needs. This is particularly important if the need is not visually evident. For example, many children with learning disabilities may not be identified for several years of schooling. Often this will be blamed on some other condition, such as laziness on the part of the child or problems at home, until the education need is finally identified (Chuiang, Liao and Tai 2005).

In this instance, the child is repeatedly placed in learning experiences where he is unable to succeed. The child then loses motivation and falls behind in development of basic skills in they are related to his disability. Students who fall behind and experience learning difficulties are often unable to participate fully in class and become disenfranchised with their school communities and in some cases with their peer in general (Jones 2004). IEPs allow the child's special education need to be communicated throughout his learning community, accommodations to be made, and the child to remain engaged with his peer group and academic work.

IEPs also provide consistent guidance for everyone responsible for the child's learning. Prior to the use of IEPs, SEN children were often identified discovered anew each year, with teachers working through how to address children's needs over and over again rather than information being passed on from the previous year's teachers (Jones 2004). Similarly, not all staff in the school that interacted with a SEN child were aware of the child's situation, preventing his needs from being met (Jones 2004). Parents and children were also not as involved prior to the use of IEPs, in which they are now guaranteed input (Jones 2004). IEPs document both the child's specific

needs and provide a means of involving many of the stakeholders in the child's educational experience.

The IEP system, however, is not the best way to address special education needs. For one thing, the system isolates and provides services for pupils with one type of learning problems whilst not addressing the needs of pupils whose problems are more environmental. Issues such as health problems that interfere with school but are not a serious medical condition, poor attendance, speech and language difficulties, problems at home, and emotional or behavioural difficulties outside the SEN guidelines are not addressed by IEPs (Callias 2001). This not only can cause a delay in identification of SEN children, as other contributing factors are considered, but also makes no provision for pupils suffering from issues such as above which compromise their learning experience (Callias 2001).

IEPs can therefore be viewed as a hindrance to full inclusion. As long as the IEP system is in place, there is less likelihood that government guidance or individual LEAs or schools will move to a whole-school strategy for all pupils (Lingard 2001). IEPs provide a framework for addressing the needs of SEN pupils, but do so on an individual basis for each pupil. If whole-school strategies were in place, IEPs could be much less detailed, or possibly eliminated (Lingard 2001). For example, the current system requires Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) at each school to spend a great amount of time writing and administering IEPs, which nearly all report could be more effectively spent on direct pupil interaction (Lingard 2001). Most SENCOs felt the pupils and the school as a whole would benefit from a system where the planning and other work associated with IEPS was shared

amongst all the teachers and staff responsible for the pupil's learning (Lingard 2001). " Where whole-school policies and schemes of work are used effectively in order to differentiate the teaching of the subjects of the curriculum, there should be no need to duplicate targets in over-elaborate IEPs" (Byers 2001, 159). The IEP system can be viewed, therefore, as a hindrance to full inclusion because it prevents schools from moving to a whole-school strategy for addressing SEN pupils' learning needs.

Within the current IEP system, there are three additional hindrances to full inclusion. A lack of input from all stakeholders in the forming of the IEP contributes to their ineffectiveness. Too often, the SENCO completes the entire IEP creation before input from parents and child are considered (Lindgard 2001). As this overworked educator rarely can gather all the pertinent information needed, IEPs are often lacking critical data. Even though government and educational authorities are required by the Children Act 2000 to consider the child holistically, many parents are unsure as to what information would be useful and therefore provide little input (Goldthorpe 2004). Similarly, many teachers view the IEP as the SENCO's responsibility and neglect to provide detailed data (Pearson 2000). This is sometimes compounded by lack of support by some teachers for inclusion of SEN pupils in mainstream schools (Pearson 2000). This lack of input from all stakeholders can lead to an IEP that is not supported by those who actually interact with the child, and therefore limits their effectiveness in promoting full inclusion.

In addition, IEPs are not effective in goal setting. Ofsted (1999) found that although schools now have IEPs in place, their effectiveness varies. For

example, IEPs present long-term goals, typically a school term or year in duration. SEN children respond better to short-term goals, like to read a chapter of a book in two weeks. As IEPs stretch out measurement of progress to the next review, they consequently become less useful in practice and less meaningful for SEN children, who are often unable to conceptualise or recognise their attainment and progress (Lingard 2001). Behavioural goals, for instance, are more effective on many IEPs than learning goals, because the behavioural goals tend to be highly specific, allowing children to understand exactly what they need to do to achieve these goals (Lingard 2001).

Finally and most importantly, IEPs hinder full inclusion because they concentrate on children's deficiencies. The other children in school are viewed in their entirety, good and poor (Kurtzig 1986). The SEN child sees his classmates considered by school staff on the basis of many possible strengths, such as athletic, artistic, and social, in addition to academic. Yet the IEP focuses the attention the SEN child receives on his difficulties. The IEP by nature considers only areas where the child is lacking (Kurtzig 1986). Schools should create in the same great detail what the student does well, and how he or she can continue to excel (Kurtizig 1986, 447).

This presents two detractions to the SEN child's full inclusion in the mainstream school. First, it causes the child himself to view himself as different and segregated from his classmates without special education needs. This causes the child to not experience full inclusion, and often leads to the child self-segregating or feeling it necessary to hide his learning difficulties from peers (Russell 2003). Second, it causes the school to

separate the child, as the SEN child now has a specific document that causes teachers and others responsible for his educational experiences to view him as different or separate from his classmates (Russell 2003). Both these effects of the IEP lead to separation and segregation, the very opposite of full participation in the life of the school (DfES 2005).

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