Individual Education Plan (IEP) Use by General Classroom Teachers

By

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Abstract

This project investigates how three general classroom teachers make use of their students’ IEPs in order to respond to their special learning needs. Qualitative methods of data gathering were employed in the form of participant interviews. Participants were interviewed once for 45 minutes each. They were asked questions regarding the usefulness of the IEPs, benefits and challenges of implementing students’ IEPs, and their instructional flexibility. The findings which emerged from the data are presented through predominant themes. These themes were IEPs and Differentiation, Benefits of Implementing the IEPs, Challenges of Implementing the IEPs, Instructional Flexibility, and IEPs and Inclusive Education. A discussion of the findings situated in the literature is presented. These teacher participants provide in-depth insights regarding the use of the IEPs and their inclusive practices in general classrooms. Their stories confirm that teaching is complicated and multi-faceted. Educators should remain flexible, reflective and reflexive in their teaching practice.

*Keywords:* IEPs, special education, inclusion, differentiated instruction, instructional flexibility
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

“You learn to talk by talking. You learn to read by reading. You learn to write by writing. You learn to include by including.”

— Bunch, 1999, p.9

In Ontario, Canada, students with special learning needs are empowered with legitimate rights to gain access to special education programs provided by the school board. They are provided with individualized educational plans (IEP) that are tailored to meet their special learning needs. Once the IEP is developed, the classroom teacher and support personnel are responsible for implementing the program and services outlined in a student’s IEP. In Ontario, students with special learning needs are typically placed in regular classes if placement in a special education class is not deemed necessary (Ontario Regulation 181/98). Nowadays, with the promotion of Ontario Human Rights Code, which outlines that “each person should feel a part of the community and able to contribute fully to the development and well-being of the community and the Province”, inclusivity lies at the centre of school education in Ontario schools (Saunders & De-Beer, 2006).

“Inclusion generally describes school arrangements in which students with and without labeled disabilities learn together in general education settings” (Baglieri, 2008, p. 9). However, it is reported that general classroom educators do not feel adequately prepared to address the needs of students labeled with disabilities (Cook, 2002; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Mullen, 2001). Researchers have found that the roadblocks to inclusive education are lack of support from administrators, lack of resources, and lack of training (Cox, 2009; Kamens, Loprete & Slostad, 2003; McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, & Lupart, 2013). Additionally, traditional perceptions of medical expertise applied in special education may lead the general classroom
teachers to feel excluded from the special education arena (Baglieri, 2008). According to
Baglieri, this medical mode unnecessarily hinders the everyday work of general classroom teach-
ers. As a result, teachers’ support of the concept of inclusion has come with reservations con-
cerning the intensity of inclusion and the severity of the disability of the student (Cox, 2009).
The purpose of the inclusive education has been compromised when students with special needs
are being placed in general classrooms without adequate planning, collaboration and implement-
ing of their educational plans. In order to meet their professional commitment, general classroom
teachers may feel pressured to stick to the only government document that is generated through
the process of identification and placement — the IEP, without realizing that the IEP comes with
its own limitations. Baglieri (2008) argued about teachers rigidly carrying out students’ IEPs by
saying that within an educational culture that is restricted by legally mandated standards of prac-
tice, “teaching students with disabilities has been practiced as primarily technical, rather than
thoughtful work” (p. 21).

No document is more significant for ensuring effective individualized educational pro-
grams than the IEP (Rotter, 2014). The intention of IEPs is to facilitate effective instructional
planning and to make sure that the special education services are delivered in a consistent and
continuous manner (Hardman & Nagle, 2004). For students with special learning needs, the IEP
is the vehicle for a free and appropriate public education (Hardman & Nagle, 2004). It provides
an opportunity for the parents, teachers and special education professionals to communicate and
to collaborate (Hardman & Nagle, 2004). A lot of research has been conducted on the topic of
IEPs. Smith (1990) first described the IEP as a process and a product. “As a process, the IEP re-
quires collaboration between parents, teachers, administrators, and the multi-disciplinary team”
(Rotter, 2014, p.1). As a product, the IEP should effectively enhance the child’s learning and the
teachers’ planning for instruction. The earliest researchers, who focused largely on the IEP as a process, reported concerns regarding extended workload, uncalled-for paperwork, inadequate support and deficient training (Dudley-Marling, 1985; McGarry & Finan, 1982). More recent research focused on the IEP as a process which highlighted the importance of involving students in the development of their own IEPs (Konrad, 2008; Uphold, 2008). Menlove, Hudson and Suter (2001) also argued the importance of increasing general classroom teachers’ involvement in the development process of IEPs so as to enhance general classroom teachers’ level of satisfaction with IEP development process. Those who looked into IEPs as a product reported that teachers view them as little more than a legal document and found them unhelpful in planning instruction (Dudley-Marling, 1985; Margolis & Truesdell, 1987). It is also reported that special educators think that they could teach and the students would learn effectively without IEPs (Rhode, 1983) and that teachers did not view IEPs as worth the time and effort put into them (Joseph, Lindgren, Creamer, & Lane, 1983). Unfortunately, very little recent research has been conducted on the IEP as a product (Rotter, 2014). Having said that, some researchers (Lee-Tarver, 2006; Rotter, 2014) who have looked into the usefulness of IEPs reported that the majority of teachers surveyed perceived IEPs as a useful instructional document.

Although many in the field agree that the IEP has limitations, there is less consensus regarding what should be done about it (Hardman & Nagle, 2004). Meyer (1997) suggested that IEPs should be held more accountable to focus on broad plans and student outcomes rather than small, discreet objectives while sticking to legal procedures and timelines. The National Council on Disability (NCD) also made the similar recommendations including establishing an emphasis on the most basic purposes of IEPs, improving the quality of IEPs and providing greater flexibil-
ity on the day-to-day instruction and the delivery of related services (1995). Instructional flexibility is also given to teachers in Ontario, Canada when implementing instructional strategies on IEPs. According to Ontario Ministry of Education document, The Individual Education Plan (IEP), A Resource Guide (2004), classroom teachers should be flexible and should use alternative strategies when accommodating students with special learning needs. The document states, The teacher should not feel restricted to using only the instructional and environmental accommodations listed. As the teacher-student relationship develops, the teacher should explore a variety of strategies that could enhance the student’s ability to learn, and make note of successful strategies in the student’s IEP. Care must be taken, however, to use only the assessment accommodations listed in the IEP… As with all students, the classroom teacher must monitor the learning-assessment process of students with IEPs carefully, so that ineffective instructional strategies and accommodations can be discontinued and replaced with new ones. (Ministry of Education, 2004, p. 33)

The Individual Education Plan (IEP), A Resource Guide (2004) also recommended that teachers should continuously assess students’ progress. Because of the ongoing assessment, the IEP needs to be adjusted accordingly in order for it to be effective and useful.

**Purpose of the Study**

In Ontario, there are nearly three hundred thousand students, identified or not, provided with special education programs and services (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010/2011). Only when the process of the implementation of IEPs in the classrooms is understood can IEPs serve the purpose of impacting the children for which they are written (McKellar, 1991). However, a
severe lack of study on the implementation of IEPs, especially in general classrooms, indicates an urgent necessity for researchers to look into this issue.

This study is meant to carry on the work of Lee-Tarver (2006) and Rotters (2014) who examined the use of IEPs by general classroom teachers, given that the effectiveness of IEPs depends on how it is developed, perceived, and carried out (Kaye & Aserlind, 1979). In this research, I looked into how general classroom teachers perceive the usefulness of IEPs and what informs teachers’ pedagogical decision making for their students with special education needs. I looked into the pedagogical approaches that general classroom teachers adopt, with or without the help of IEPs, in order to effectively meet the needs of students with special needs. I assume that, rather than the rote application of what has been recorded on the IEPs, the general classroom teachers employ a wide array of teaching strategies that are carefully thought out and planned for in response to the needs and interests of the individual student. I assume that teachers, when finding strategies recorded on students’ IEPs are not working so well, will seek for other strategies necessary to support the students’ academic needs. Here by “other strategies” I mean strategies that are carefully chosen and planned based on the teacher’s teaching beliefs and philosophies, professional judgment, and prior teaching experiences. More importantly, teachers choose strategies that are deemed to be the most appropriate and suitable regarding individual students under particular circumstances. When studying education, prospective educators are provided with a large reservoir of knowledge of disability categories with specific skills and strategies for accommodation or modification (Baglieri, 2008). I believe, however, that each child has unique learning needs and cannot be generalized with the descriptions of a category or
categories that they may fall into. It is the responsibilities of the educators to be flexible and reflexive and constantly reflect upon their teaching experiences with individual students and adopt strategies that are appropriate in the time of instruction.

This study aims to call attention to the intricacies of the teaching and learning of special education in general classrooms through the narratives of three teachers’ teaching practice in general classrooms. I aim to provide a holistic picture of how these three teachers make use of students’ IEPs to achieve their teaching responsibilities while remaining grounded in scientifically approved practice.

**Background of the Researcher**

I was a high school teacher in China before I first came to Canada in 2013. I completed all of my education in China and gained my teaching certificate in China. However, I have never received any training to support students with special learning needs. In addition, there were little resources and administrative support available for teachers to assist students with special learning needs. Educational policy in China (mainland) has always been exclusive. It has always been for students who, seemingly, have the greatest potential to learn — the most academically capable ones. A school’s program is not to be altered or modified in order to fit the needs or capabilities of students with special learning needs. Students with special learning needs in China sit in the general classrooms, use the same learning materials and resources, receive the same instructions from their teachers and are assessed the same way as their non-special counterparts are assessed. They have to fight for themselves. I remember there were two boys in my Grade 7 class whom I could tell were experiencing great difficulties with their academic studies. Because there were no structures similar to IPRC (the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee) to
identify their learning needs, nor self-contained special education programs, they were not sup-
ported or guided in any official way. In such circumstances, seeking ways to teach students with
special learning needs to make it a more inclusive classroom lies solely at the centre of my teach-
ing practice. I relied on my own teaching beliefs that every child has potential to learn, and my
professional judgement to academically support students with special learning needs in my class.
I was left to search for resources and try different teaching strategies in order to support and as-
sist my students.

Since I have come to Canada, I have been fascinated to learn how special education is car-
ried out in the Canadian education system. Given that I used to be a general classroom teacher
who struggled to support students with special learning needs in my class, I’m interested in the
strategies that general classroom teachers use within their classrooms to support students with
diverse learning needs. Furthermore, as an educator in China, I had first-hand opportunities to
experience both the frustrations and successes when trying to implement strategies for children
with various needs based on my own personal and professional judgement. Having experienced
that, I came to a realization that every child has a different learning style and particular learning
needs that cannot be categorized or generalized in any way. By conducting this research, I want
to explore the complex nature of education. I also hope my research will inform my understand-
ing of inclusive education, which in turn, will inform my own teaching practice.

Research Questions

The primary question that my research investigates is “How does a small sample of general
classroom teachers make use of students’ IEPs to respond to the needs of students with special
learning needs?” For the purpose of my study, the following questions were examined:
1. How do general classroom teachers perceive the usefulness of IEPs?

2. What are some of the benefits and challenges of implementing IEPs in general classrooms?

3. What influences the teachers’ pedagogical decisions in terms of supporting students with special needs in general classrooms?

Overview

In this study I examined how IEPs are implemented in general classrooms. Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study. Chapter 2 contains an overview of relevant literature on the proposed study. Specifically, it includes a review of the literature on perspectives and attitude on inclusive education, the challenges of implementation of IEPs, IEPs as supportive tools for teachers, and teacher training towards inclusive education. Chapter 3 discusses the method and procedures of this study. It includes information about the criteria for selection of teacher participants, how the interviews were carried out, and how the data was collected and analyzed. Chapter 4 presents the participants in the study and the findings. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implication for the researcher as well as the educational community. I also highlight some of insights gained through this study and give recommendations for practice and further study. A list of references and appendices follows.
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Perspectives and Attitude on Inclusive Education

“Inclusion generally describes school-based arrangements in which students with and without labeled disabilities learn together in general education settings” (Baglieri, 2008, p. 9). Prior to the 1970s in Canada, students with special learning needs went to schools that provided special education services and were grouped together for learning (Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education, n.d.). A movement which took place during the 1970s began to bring students with special needs back to general classrooms. They might still be grouped together for learning but they were allowed to go to general classrooms to be “mainstreamed” during certain periods in a day (Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education, n.d.). Inclusion in its earlier years simply meant to place students with special learning needs among their non-special counterparts so they could benefit from this “normalized” environment, socially and emotionally (Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education, n.d.). However, inclusion is now interpreted as full participation not only socially but also academically, as it is promoted that students with special needs are entitled to equitable educational opportunities (Gallagher, 2001). This act of “normalization” is based on the idea that people with special needs should be viewed as more similar to others, rather than different (Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education, n.d.).

There has been constant debate over whether general class placement for students with special needs serve the purpose of education better than the placement in special classrooms (Saunders & DeBeer, 2006). Some researchers argue that students with special needs need a protective, special environment in order to learn (Landrum, Tankersley & Kauffman, 2003). Goldstein (2006) asserts that the legal documents and regulations which put students with special needs in general classrooms, fails to acknowledge that general education curriculum is inappropriate for
students with disabilities. Goldstein (2006) claimed that mainstreaming students with special needs is an act of “high costs and low results for all students who cannot profit from the general education curriculum” (p.26). “Special education in inclusive program is, by design, no longer special” (Baker & Zigmond, 1995, p. 245).

On the other hand, Lupart (1998) thought that it was time to bring special education and general education together. Wood (2002) argued that all students should begin their educational experience within the general education classroom unless under very specific circumstances where students are considered most appropriate to be placed in special classrooms. Wood (2002) identified six parts comprising the concept of inclusion: social inclusion, emotional inclusion, behavioural inclusion, physical inclusion, academic inclusion, and inclusion by assessment standards. Baglieri and Knopf (2004) use the term “moral imperative” to describe the importance of “mainstreaming” students with special needs (p.526). Other voices point out that whether or not to include students with special needs in general classrooms depends on how severe the student’s disability is (Wood, 2002). Crossley (2000) compared the strengths and weaknesses of inclusion and concluded that:

Inclusion is the logical choice when a child’s disabilities are so minimal that exclusion would be detrimental to his or her social and educational growth. Including this type of child into a general education environment could improve the child’s self-esteem, and proponents of inclusion contend that this in turn could contribute to greater academic success… The disabled child may use the other children as role models and eventually come to realize that everyone is different in one way or another… Some disabilities are so severe
that placement in a general classroom actually can hinder the child’s growth. These children are served better in a separate facility which is specifically equipped to accommodate the child’s disability. (P. 253)

Students with disabilities have the support of many social policies in Ontario including the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s (OHRC), which requires accommodations extended to the field of education (Saunders & DeBeer, 2006). Therefore, educators are mandated to provide appropriate accommodations and modifications to meet the needs of diverse students. This issue is now considered a human rights issue (Saunders & DeBeer, 2006).

It is the responsibility of all members in the school community to implement inclusion (Baglieri, 2008). However, teachers clearly play a primary role in the movement of inclusion (Falvey, 1995; Stanovich & Jordan, 2002). While the movement for inclusive education has appealed as a social justice issue, many educators are hesitant about supporting students with special needs in general classrooms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). General classroom teachers feel unprepared to address the needs of students with disabilities (Cook, 2002; Mullen, 2001). Specifically, researchers found that the roadblocks to inclusive education after two decades of implementing inclusive programs are lack of support from administrators, lack of resources, little time for collaboration and consultation, and lack of training (Cox, 2000). The OHRC (Ontario Human Rights Commission) also identified major obstacles for full implementation of inclusive education: inadequate funding, physical inaccessibility, cumbersome and time-consuming accommodation processes, negative attitudes and stereotypes, and a lack of understanding of the rights and responsibilities of all parties (Saunders & DeBeer, 2006). Furthermore, traditional views on disabilities in the medical arena adds another barrier to successful inclusion. It was discussed in
Baglieri’s (2008) research that the traditional medical model of special education interprets disabled persons’ experiences in a generalized and classified way that failed to maximize their abilities in general classroom settings. Baglieri (2008) stated that:

“Problematically, traditional conceptualizations of medical expertise applied in education may lead teachers to assume that categorical definitions can explain students' experience of disability, rather than consider multiple facets of children's lives and identities that have an impact on their engagement in schooling. (p.22) … Education for students labeled disabled becomes likened to symptom-specific clinical practice, rather than in terms of expansive possibilities for learning and a discourse of expertise, then further construes special education as a field from which general educators feel excluded.” (p.25)

In her research, Baglieri (2008) expresses concerns about the contradictions and inconsistencies in teachers’ attitudes toward educating disabled students in general classrooms, despite the advocacy and emphasis on inclusive education over the past decades. She suggested that prospective teachers benefit from opportunities to study disability history, experience primary source materials that feature disabled persons, make connections to disability rights, and have freedom to engage in discussion of disability (Baglieri, 2008). Talmor, Reiter and Feigin (2005) have shown that in order to enhance the success of inclusive education, a couple of factors must be present. First, there must be a positive attitude of the general education teacher regarding having students with disabilities in the regular class. And second, there needs to be continuous support and assistance from personnel such as special education teachers, school counsellors, school psychologists and administrators.

In 2000, Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden completed a study of mainstream teachers’ attitudes toward the inclusion of special needs students. In this study, it was found that two thirds of
Running Head: IEP USE

the participants surveyed were positive towards the concept of inclusion. However, the section regarding open-ended questions were answered similarly by the teachers as they expressed the dire need for more support, recourses, time and adequate training. Molto (2003) explored mainstream education teachers’ perceptions of instructional adaptations in inclusive classrooms. Eighty-nine mainstream teachers participated and finished the questionnaires. The results showed that general classroom teachers primarily provided strategies which included providing reinforcement to the students, meeting the individual and group educational needs at the same time, teaching learning strategies, and coaching the students on how to learn (Molto, 2003). Furthermore, the practices accepted by a large number of general classroom teachers were: checking students’ previous mastery and skills; establishing norms, rules and routines; and providing alternate options for activities (Molto, 2003).

The Challenges of Implementation of IEPs

What is an IEP? Cooper (1996) stated that the IEP is a document that services the broad educational purposes of providing a formalized educational plan for students with special learning needs, recording the performance and evaluation of the plan, as well as being a platform for all the involvement from the educators, students and parents. The content of an IEP includes a student’s curriculum, teaching requirements, review arrangements, and medical requirements (Visser, 1994). According to Ontario Ministry of Education Resource Guide: the Individual Education Plan (IEP) (2004) is “a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student, based on a thorough assessment of the student’s strengths and needs” (p. 6). It is a record of particular accommodations designated for particular students, a working document that identifies modified expectations, a record of assessment and evaluation
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skills for student achievement, and an accountability tool for all parties such as the student, the student’s parents, teachers and other personnel who work with the student (The Individual Education Plan A Resource Guide, 2004). An IEP is not a list of things taught to the students, a collection of teaching strategies, a record of learning expectations, or a lesson plan (The Individual Education Plan A Resource Guide, 2004). This resource guide was put together based on the reviews from numerous educators and parents.

“Some researchers have raised provocative questions about the function and usefulness of IEPs (Smith, 1990b)” (Gallagher & Desimone, 1995, p. 355). Agran and Wehmeyer (2002), Kurth and Mastergeorge (2010), Ruble, McGrew, Dalrymple, Lee, and Jung (2010) presented findings that identified problems in the appropriateness of instructional supports, services, goals and objectives in students’ IEPs (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Additionally, Espin, Deno and Albayrak-Kaymak’s (1998) findings raised concern in terms of whether or not the IEP is individualized based on students’ needs (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Hardman and Nagle (2004) wrote that: “The intent of the IEP as defined in IDEA (Individual with Disabilities Education Act) is to facilitate effective instructional planning. However, many professionals and parents seem to agree that the IEP has become mechanistic, concerned more with procedure than results” (p. 282). Rotter (2014) looked into the perceived usefulness of IEPs by general classroom teachers and found out that approximately 30% of the teachers surveyed made the recommendation to have the IEP simplified in terms of format and more accurate and specific in terms of student-related information. The teacher participants who were surveyed used the words such as “cumbersome” to describe the format and “cookie cutter”, “canned”, and “not individualized” to describe the current levels of academic achievement, functional performance, and the objectives of
the IEPs (p.6). Rotter (2014) concluded that the “functional rhetoric without substance” reported by Giangreco et al. (1994) seems to still be an issue today (p.6).

In an article written by Menlove, Hudson and Suter in 2001, they called for the increase of general classroom teachers’ participation in the IEP development process. They found out that IEP plans sometimes are missing some important elements and they are not addressing problems in the general education classrooms (Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001). They concluded that general education teachers report lower satisfaction with IEP documents as a result of their low involvement in the production of IEP. (Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001). They stated that:

“This field of dreams (field of special education) is created by idealistic visionaries, who develop legislation, regulations, and mandates that we must put into practice in actual school settings with limited time and resources. Although we see the reasons for these best practice dreams and expectations, we know the reality of what happens in actual practice” (Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001, p. 32).

“Before the reauthorization of IDEA 1997, there were many pedagogical problems with IEPs. Among these problems was the minimal collaboration with general education teachers which was seen as evidence of the IEPs failure to produce intended goals (Huefner, 2000)” (Dildine, 2010, p.35). Lee-Tarver (2006) claimed that general education teachers are becoming a more active part in the development and implementation of IEPs. “By placing children in inclusive settings, the traditional role of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which is viewed as an exclusive domain of special education, has been changed” (Dildine, p.5). General classroom teachers now use IEPs to design personalized instructions for students with special learning needs in their classes (Lee-Tarver, 2006).
IEPs as Supportive Tools for Teachers

While the effectiveness of IEPs are being questioned by some, the importance and the usefulness of IEPs are being justified by others. Wright & Wright (1997) consider the IEP an integral part of meeting the needs of students with disabilities. It is considered a crucial device where communication takes place among parents, students, administrators, teachers, and other related personnel (Armenta & Beckers, 2006). In more recent research, Rotter (2014) looked into IEP use by general and special education teachers. The usefulness of IEPs in lesson planning was evaluated by teacher participants from the aspects of the goals, objectives, present levels of academic achievement, and functional performance. The results showed each aspect to be of moderate usefulness (results were measured on a 5-point rating scale with 3 being good and 5 being excellent). In the US, the IEP is regarded as central to the public law on education for students with disabilities. It is said that:

“... the IEP was considered the necessary component from which to monitor and enforce the law. The IEP supports individualized instruction based on egalitarian views of mankind with the intent of providing adequate educational opportunities for children and youth with handicapping conditions. Succinctly, the EAHCA (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act: Public Law 94-142) was intended to provide administrators with proof of compliance, teachers with formalized plans, parents with voice, and students with an appropriate education. Thus the importance of IEPs to children’s education cannot be minimized or ignored.” (Smith, 1990, p.6)

In the year of 2006, 123 regular classroom teachers from Alabama and Georgia participated in a research conducted by Lee-Tarver and the result revealed that the majority of them
found IEPs useful tools in planning and implementing educational goals and objectives for children with disabilities within their classes. Rotter (2014), however, commented on the results of this research by saying, “these overall positive findings still mean that over one third of the teachers surveyed did not use the IEP for instructional planning purposes” (p. 2). Nevertheless, the result of Lee-Tarver’s research was in contrast to the ones found by Dudley-Marling (1985), Margolis and Truesdell (1987), who reported less than satisfactory results of special education teachers using IEPs as instructional references.

The process of developing an IEP starts with the intention of providing the child with individualized education so that that child can be successful academically (Dildine, 2010). Meanwhile, it is widely accepted that not all children learn in the same way and at the same rate, thus instruction must be differentiated (Lee-Tarver, 2006). In an effort to create an inclusive environment, many school districts and individual schools are moving away from traditional teaching to differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction has become a crucial tool to educate all students within the general education classroom (Dildine, 2010). According to Dildine (2010), using an IEP as a tool can help a teacher to better understand the needs of the students and help the teacher to differentiate instruction accordingly. Dildine (2010) looked into the extent to which general classroom teachers find IEP a useful tool in designing instructional plans. The results show that teachers agreed that IEP helped them to prioritize their instructional objectives. These participants also agreed that the IEP helps them to organize and structure their teaching better and that they feel that they are better teachers because the IEP helps guide their instructional planning. Moreover, teachers in this study used IEPs to guide instructional activities and strategies.
According to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) Provincial Trends Report 2012: Student Achievement and Narrowing Gaps, the Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes the IEP as “a critical tool in driving achievement and well-being for students with special education needs” (Individual Education Plan (IEP) Provincial Trends Report 2012: Student Achievement and Narrowing Gaps, 2012, p. 1). School boards in Ontario, however, also made suggestions for areas requiring improvement for the better development, implementation and monitoring of IEPs. These areas include internal IEP processing, parent consultation, IEP professional development, resources, IEP awareness development, and elements of the IEP such as the student’s program description, learning expectations and transition planning (Individual Education Plan (IEP) Provincial Trends Report 2012: Student Achievement and Narrowing Gaps, 2012).

Instructional flexibility is given to general and special education teachers in Ontario when implementing students’ IEPs. As outlined in Ontario Ministry of Education document “The Individual Education Plan (IEP) A Resource Guide (2004), Phase 4: Implement the IEP”, it is the responsibility of all teachers to carry out the IEP but they should not be restricted in using strategies other than the content recorded on IEPs. It also recommends that the assessment of students with an IEP should be ongoing and continuous and that the IEP needs to be adjusted accordingly. It provides ways for the IEP to be adjusted such as developing new annual expectations, altering the teaching strategies, making use of special equipment and additional human support. Any revisions to the IEP should be recorded. Instructional flexibility, according to Scott, Vitale, and Masten (1998), requires the implementation of alternative teaching strategies such as the modification of materials, testing, assignments, and grading, or the adaptation of presentation styles, grouping in the classroom, and feedback methods.
Teacher Training towards Inclusive Education

The importance of training has been emphasized in a number of research papers. Molto (2003) stated that teachers and other educators should be equipped with the basic knowledge of educating students with special needs before they differentiate their instruction in their classrooms. Lee-Tarver (2006) also suggested that more training is needed for general classroom teachers on the development and implementation of IEPs. The findings of Lee-Tarver’s research on teachers’ perceptions of the utility of IEPs in general classroom settings conveys the importance for teachers to attain the skills necessary to better serve students with diverse needs in their classes.

Supporting the findings of Lee-Tarver (2006), Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden’s (2000) research on general classroom teachers’ attitude towards inclusion indicated a clear difference between the confidence level of the teachers who had experience teaching students with special needs and those with limited or no experience. This result was consistent with the findings reported earlier by LeRoy and Simpson (1996) who found out that as teachers’ experience with children with special learning needs increased, their confidence in teaching the children increased as well. Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden’s (2000) also reported that teachers with sufficient training not only tend to be more positive to inclusion, but also more confident in terms of meeting IEP requirements. Smith and Smith (2002) agreed that teacher-training programs at the university level should commit to share the responsibilities of training teachers to work with students with special needs (Dildine, 2010). Dildine (2010) claimed that in order to achieve effective and genuine inclusive practice, formal training and college preparation is needed for general classroom teachers. In fact, all teachers need direct and focused training on how to write, develop and implement IEPs as students’ needs continue to change and be more evident.
A number of studies have reported on the outcomes of training in the area of special education. Carroll et al. (2003) looked into 220 teachers’ attitudes toward disability before and after an undergraduate level disability-related course and found that after the 10-week course, preservice teachers felt “less ignorant, more able to act normally and surer of how to behave” (p. 76). A similar study carried out by Shippen and associates (2005) examined the before and after attitudes of 326 preservice teachers who took a course related to exceptionalities and the results showed that this course “significantly changed the attitudes of both future general and future special educators” (p.97). It seems that preservice teachers’ attitudes at the end of these information-based courses were affected positively. However, this positive change does not necessarily indicate “an optimal degree of comfort” (Baglieri, 2008, p.100). Baglieri (2008) claimed that these information-based courses related to exceptionalities or disabilities do not report considerable changes in teachers’ attitudes. Baglieri (2008) argued that this might have something to do with the medical model of special education which overruns most conceptualizations of teacher education towards inclusion. Baglieri (2008) said that “the field of teacher education, described in the background to this work, overwhelmingly characterizes its role to prepare teachers for inclusion as a technical practice that reflects a medical model” (p.97). Peterson and Beloin (1998) and Mullen (2001) also argued that “mainstreaming courses and textbooks seem to focus on categorical disabilities” (p.315) but “that knowledge of disability categories does not appear to support teachers to be inclusive educators” (Baglieri, 2008, p.102). Fisher et al. (2003) pointed out that the knowledge of disability categories alone fails to support teachers to acknowledge and identify each individual child’s strengths and weaknesses. Instead, teachers should start to view “disability” as “diversity” in order to truly include students with special needs in general classrooms (Baglieri, 2008).
Teachers in Ontario have engaged themselves in ongoing capacity building in terms of how to use IEPs and work with students with special needs for the past decade. In the years of between 2006 and 2012, the Ontario Ministry of Education conducted collaborative reviews regarding Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and corresponding Provincial Report Cards (Individual Education Plans (IEPs) Provincial Report 2012: Student Achievement and Narrowing Gaps, 2012). The two reviews indicated teachers’ ongoing capacity building to improve their planning, implementation and monitoring of IEPs between 2006 and 2012. This capacity building focused on four major areas: awareness development, professional development, resource development, and internal IEP reviews (Individual Education Plans (IEPs) Provincial Report 2012: Student Achievement and Narrowing Gaps, 2012). Methods used to deliver professional development for the teachers included presentations, IEP video training, IEP software manual development, job embedded coaching opportunities, local special education courses and so on (Individual Education Plans (IEPs) Provincial Report 2012: Student Achievement and Narrowing Gaps, 2012). Participants reported improvement in their professional development through these offered learning opportunities (Individual Education Plans (IEPs) Provincial Report 2012: Student Achievement and Narrowing Gaps, 2012).
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research investigates how general classroom teachers perceive the usefulness of IEPs and what informs teachers’ pedagogical decision making for their students with special education needs. Within this chapter I present general procedures, participant selection, data collection and analysis, ethical review procedures, and the limitations of my research.

Procedure

This is a qualitative research study, as according to Creswell (2013) that we conduct qualitative research when we need a complex, detailed understanding of an issue with variables that cannot be easily measured. My literature review consists of both former qualitative and quantitative research and Ministry documents. Given that the nature of IEPs is constantly being upgraded and changed, a majority of the cited research studies chosen were published after the year of 2000. I have conducted face-to-face interviews with three experienced teachers working in this area in order to gain better understanding of the issues related to implementing students’ IEPs in general classrooms. As Creswell (2013) states:

“the detail of an issue can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (p. 48).

The teacher participants were invited to reflect upon their perspectives regarding the usefulness of IEPs, the challenges and successful experiences of the implementation of IEPs. A report of the research findings emerging from these interviews follows and the discussion of these findings is presented. The implications of this research for myself as an educator, as well as the implications
for the educational community are also highlighted. Last but not the least, I suggest areas for further study.

**Participants**

Throughout the research process, I interviewed three elementary teachers in a collaborative exploration of their inclusive education experiences. I selected participants who had at least five years of teaching experience of working with students with special needs in general classrooms and who were committed to the cause of inclusive education. The reason why the participants should have at least five years of experience of working with special students is that at least five years of working in inclusive educational settings might have benefited them in developing their own teaching philosophy as well as professional judgment. It could also have granted them more opportunities to learn from colleagues, engage in ongoing professional development, read professional texts, etc. Two of the three teachers were co-teaching Grade 3/4 students in the same elementary school. I interviewed them both during the lunch hour of a school day. One of them was interviewed independently by me first, and then the other teacher joined us. The third interviewee was a Grade 5 teacher in another elementary school. He had been a general classroom teacher for more than 5 years. He had completed Special Education specialist courses. All the interviews took place during convenient times for the teachers. In addition, all interviews took place in open, public spaces such as classrooms.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I conducted face-to-face interviews with three elementary teachers who were working in this field. Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews were no longer than 45 minutes
The participants were asked 12 interview questions in total. They were invited to first talk about their professional background, and then to talk about the use of IEPs and the benefits and challenges of implementing IEPs in general classrooms (see appendix A for the interview questions).

The three interviews were digitally recorded by me. I immersed myself in listening to the recorded data several times. The collected data was then transcribed by me for the purpose of analysis. Themes began to emerge as I coded the data. I found five predominant themes: IEPs and Differentiation, Benefits of Implementing the IEPs, Challenges of Implementing the IEPs, Instructional Flexibility, and IEPs and Inclusive Education. I put the themes in line with my research questions and within each theme I compared the data to analyze similarities and differences. Within each theme I also integrated quotes and examples provided by the participants in order to allow readers direct access to the participants’ practices and beliefs. The finding of the study was used to add to existing knowledge of inclusive education and knowledge of IEPs.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

I strictly followed the ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program. Before the interviews, I made sure each of my teacher participants understood the purpose and the procedure of my study and made myself available to answer their questions via e-mail or phone if they had any inquiries regarding my research and their participation. I gave each of my teacher participants the consent form before the interviews (see appendix A). The teacher participants’ confidentiality and anonymity was ensured throughout the research. I maintained a trusting relationship with the teacher participants throughout the research. They were informed of the
risks and benefits of participating in this research and they were given complete freedom to decline answering any of the interview questions. All participants were allowed to leave the study at any time without consequence. After the interview, the collected data was kept on my personal computer with no access for others. The data was destroyed immediately once the research was complete.

Limitations

Due to the parameters of the Master of Teaching program and the resulting time constraints, there were limitations associated with this study. These limitations include the small sample size, the selective literature review, and the researcher bias. The fact that only three general classroom teachers were interviewed means that the findings from this research cannot be generalized. Furthermore, because of the confidentiality of students’ IEPs and the legal requirements of the implementation of IEPs, participants might have felt reluctant to reveal the student’s information. In addition, the literature review that I have provided does not include an exhaustive list of all the theories or findings that are possibly related to my research topic. I focused my literature review primarily on inclusive education and the benefits and challenges of implementing the IEPs. These are the findings that have had a great impact on me for the past two years, even though I might have missed some other research findings that could be meaningful to my topic. It is also important to acknowledge that the research that I am presenting reflects my own educational beliefs, values, and principles which might have been projected in the way I collected and interpreted the data. However, I placed my findings in the context of former research in this area.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

In this study, I looked into the perceived usefulness of IEPs by general classroom teachers and the factors that inform general classroom teachers’ pedagogical responses to the needs of students with special learning needs. Chapter 4 outlines the analysis of the three interviews that I conducted with 3 elementary teachers to understand their experiences and perspectives. In order to illustrate the multiple layers of meaning and connection with one another from my findings, I have clustered the data into 5 themes: IEPs and Differentiation, Benefits of Implementing the IEPs, Challenges of Implementing the IEPs, Instructional Flexibility, and IEPs and Inclusive Education. These themes are further broken down into categories, which highlight the complexity and intricacies of this issue.

Introduction to Participants

Linda is a Grade 3/4 teacher. She has been teaching more than 22 years. Her teaching experience mostly took place in Toronto. Linda does not have any formal training in terms of supporting students with special needs. However, she did attend special education related workshops provided by either the special education department of the school board or teachers from other schools. Linda has three students who are on IEPs in her class. She was responsible for making and updating the IEPs. However, Linda also incorporated suggestions made by special education teachers and parents.

Sara has been teaching more than 15 years. She is currently co-teaching with Linda in the same Grade 3/4 classroom. Linda and Sara teach everything together except Math, Science, and Social Studies. For these three subjects, Linda teaches Grade 4 students and Sara teaches all the
Grade 3s. Like Linda, Sara does not have any formal training related to teaching students with special needs. However, Sara has attended workshops related to teaching students with special needs. Sara also makes and updates the students’ IEPs.

David has more than 5 years of teaching experience. David is currently a Grade 5 general classroom teacher. David is a special education specialist. He took Additional Qualification courses in Special Education in university and he has completed special education part one, two and three. David believes that a successful IEP is created in collaboration between the resource teachers, the home school teachers, and the classroom teacher.

**IEPs and Differentiation**

Linda has three students in her class who are students identified with special needs. One student is on a modified IEP and this student goes to a special education class in the morning and returns to home class in the afternoon. The two students who are on accommodated IEPs, on the other hand, are in the class the whole time. For the student who is on a modified IEP, Linda changes or reduces the expectations for the subjects that Linda teaches. For instance, the class is learning about the different provinces in Canada and they are asked to draw maps and write paragraphs about those provinces. The student who is on a modified IEP, however, is expected to simply remember the names of the provinces. Linda has the same expectations for the two students who are on accommodated IEPs as she has for the rest of the class. The accommodated strategy for them is really just to change the way they present their knowledge. For example, the students who are accommodated are allowed to give oral answers instead of written ones.

Linda uses all the strategies that are listed on students’ IEPs, such as scribing for the student to allow more time for schoolwork, having the student sit near her, repeating instructions,
and using charts or graphs to help organize thoughts and ideas. Linda usually uses a different layout for Math tests for the students who are accommodated in her class. This different layout contains extra explanations and more explicit instructions. However, Linda would have some other students whom she believes have organizational problems use the same kind of layout that she designs for students with identified special learning needs.

Sara changes the way she expects the students with special needs to demonstrate their knowledge as well. For example, she has the students make a movie, a poster, a drawing, or do something orally to show what they know. She mentioned how she and Linda had been able to better assist students with special needs with external help from other personnel. She said,

One thing we have done this year is to give notes ahead of time to have somebody read to them before the lesson so that when we are doing the lesson they have already heard the information and they are prepared for it before the rest of the class. So we are being able to do that this year because we have somebody who can sit with them and reinforce or take what they have done that day, look at it the next day and just go over it again. It’s just more reinforcement of the material.

David differentiates his instruction from environmental, instructional, and assessment aspects based on the students’ IEPs. For example, if it is recorded on the IEP that this student requires computers to do his or her work then the access to a computer in the classroom must be available for this student. Some other examples provided by David are frequent washroom breaks, special tools or headsets, things to hold in hands while working, quiet environments in which to work, extensions for assignments or projects, group work and so on. David thinks that in addition to what’s recorded on IEPs, it is essential to know the students. David also thinks that
it is important to balance his expectations for students with special needs with the expectations that he has for the rest of the class. He explained:

You have to let the class know as a whole that, everyone is going to be treated fairly but that doesn’t mean everyone is going to be given the same exact things because there are different needs for learners. So you have to… you have got to know your kids.

For students who are on modified IEPs, David also reduces expectations to support their needs. Additionally, he gives the student less work. He explained that “instead of ask him to finish ten questions out of ten, you would say finish six out of ten”. Generally, David thinks that IEPs could be very beneficial to teachers because it teaches teachers how to plan not just for the class but the class plus that one student. He mentioned that teachers can differentiate their instruction based on the IEPs if the IEPs are well-written, detailed and accurate.

**Benefits of Implementing the IEPs**

*Promoting the Understanding of Students’ Needs*

All of my participants acknowledged IEPs as an important reminder of the students’ needs. Linda and Sara mentioned that having IEPs not only made them aware of the needs of the students with special needs, but also the needs of all of the students. Linda believes that having to read and implement the IEPs in her class actually made her sensitive to other students’ needs. She said:

So even though not all the students have an IEP, I will teach to the whole group in the same way as if they all did have an IEP. So it’s good for everybody. So even though not everybody has an IEP, I may give other students the same test because they need help with organization. But this student also has other needs, so that’s why this test looks like this.
But other students might just have organizational problems as a challenge. But this student was also accommodated. So having an IEP makes me aware of everybody’s needs. We all benefit from help and support, whether it’s been identified or not. We all like to have a little extra help.

Sara mentioned that another benefit of having an IEP is when a supply teacher comes into the classroom that teacher will be able to reference a student’s IEP. She mentioned that she would assure the student who is on IEP that the supply teacher will know his or her needs and that “it is just to keep those kids from getting lost”. Linda also mentioned how IEPs inform the other teachers in the school of the needs of the students with IEPs. She said:

This Phys Ed teacher also teaches Health where more reading and writing are expected. So just remind the Phys Ed teacher, “Hey this student has an IEP.” I have to modify my expectations during Health class for those two students. If we say write a paragraph about Healthy Eating, these two can’t do that. So it also reminds the other teachers as well, not just the regular classroom teachers.

David assumes that IEPs are helpful for teachers who don’t have a special education background. Also, when the students move to the next grade and there is a new teacher teaching this student, an IEP could inform the new teacher what this student needs in order for this student to succeed academically.

IEPs Promote Students’ Success

The intention of IEPs is to provide the teachers with information regarding the students’ needs in order to promote the students’ academic success. Sara and Linda agree that IEPs made the students feel successful and safe. Linda said that:
Well… it helps them to be successful. They can see that they can do the work. They are capable. Maybe they just need more steps or explanations but they can do it as well. And they have a sense of accomplishment that they can do the work. We talked about it in class that everybody is different. We do things in different ways, but we still have the same goal. One can do this, do this, and do this, but how you do it might be different, and that’s okay. So it gives them a sense of being able to do the work, like everybody else.

Linda thinks that the IEPs are “what we can do to help students be successful”. Linda noticed the academic success reflected on the student with an IEP’s report card whereas students who don’t have an IEP achieve lower. Linda sees this contrast as a result of students work independently versus the students who have a lot of support. It is obvious that Linda sees that absolute positive connection between the IEPs and the students’ academic success.

Sara believes that IEPs make the students with special needs feel safer and included in the classroom. She also thinks that IEPs make the supply teachers aware of students’ special learning needs. This takes the pressure off the students because they know that the teachers coming into their classroom have that knowledge. Sara believes that because of the accommodations or the modifications, students with special needs are able to experience academic success. She added:

I think it helps the kids feel more successful overall, because their report cards are going to show differently, too, whereas before an IEP they might be seeing Ds and Rs, they are going to start to see Cs which for them is way more successful.

Challenges of Implementing the IEPs

Time
Sara and Linda both expressed great concern about not having enough time to work on the IEPs or use IEPs as instructional references to support the students. Linda thinks it is, first of all, time-consuming to accommodate or modify the curriculum expectations. Even when the IEP is there for her it takes time to actually implement the strategies recorded on the IEP. Linda gave an example of how she rarely uses the strategy which is to record students’ answers. She found it difficult to find time to actually listen to and record the student’s answers even though this strategy is recorded on the students’ IEP. Even though time is obviously a big issue for them to carry out students’ IEPs, Sara thinks that she sometimes is pressured into implementing the IEPs by the parents. She stated:

It’s all about time, we don’t have enough time to… I don’t know, it’s all time. I think if I also had a parent who was looking at that all the time and checking it and all that kind of stuff, then maybe I would be on that IEP all the time.

*Extra Workload*

The extra workload is something that all three participants mentioned about implementing the IEPs. David felt that the challenge of having an IEP was that if it was not beneficial, then the teacher has to rework the IEP to make it work, which puts an extra workload on teachers. Sara thinks IEPs are generally “tedious” to do and that it is a lot of work. She explained:

For some kids, it’s every subject, because we are talking about modified IEPs right? We have other kids who have accommodated IEPs where you are changing the program necessarily, just what they need to be more successful.

Linda thinks it is a lot of work especially when she has students who are modified in her class. She has to first go through the curriculum and make a lot of changes and then teach based on
those individualized curriculums. When most of the reading materials are not at the reading level of a specific student in her class, she has to seek extra materials which are at the student’s reading level so that this student can learn. Both Linda and Sara have a strong feeling that the extra workload that IEPs have brought upon these general classroom teachers has been a challenge.

When the students are transferring from one school to another, one province to another, or the students are just arriving in Canada, their IEPs might not be available for their new teachers. Under those circumstances, the teacher has to make a new IEP for the student if the teacher sees the necessity. This also adds to the teacher’s workload. Linda said:

Sometimes we have students new to the school who didn’t have an IEP from last school, but it’s very obvious that they do need an IEP. So it’s very challenging as a teacher to work with this new student who is working two grades below but has no IEP. So we have to create an IEP.

Unavailability to Other Students

Linda thinks it hard to attend to other students’ needs when having students with special needs in a general classroom. Especially when the student needs constant external support and help with schoolwork, the teacher’s availability to help other students has been relatively reduced. Linda argued:

And it’s challenging to… if you have a class, it’s challenging to sit with one or two students all the time and you can’t help with the rest of the class because they also might need help (nineteen students in the class). Because you want to help everybody, make sure they
are all getting what they need. Usually the very smart kids can do it. Kids who are struggling you spend time with. The kids who are average, they kind of sometimes have to fight for themselves.

The Usefulness of IEPs

Linda, Sara and David expressed different levels of concern regarding the usefulness of IEPs. Linda thinks that the usefulness of IEPs has a lot to do with how the teachers from the previous year wrote the students’ IEPs. She thinks that sometimes the IEP does not apply to the student in a new year in a new class with a new teacher and that’s when she finds it difficult to make use of them. In terms of the IEP itself, Linda thinks that sometimes it is a bit frustrating. Linda feels that the strategies that are recorded on a particular student’s IEP are not individualized and not specific because she uses the same strategies for other students in the class as well. Linda argued “Why have an IEP if I do this for everybody?”.

Sara has strong feelings regarding the usefulness of IEPs. She repeatedly used the word “generic” to describe the methods listed in IEPs. Sara mentioned the pull-down boxes where teachers choose strategies such as extra time for work, quiet work space, and extra processing time, which she thinks are merely common strategies and not specific at all. Sara argued:

It's a bit generic, I think… most of the IEPs probably if you look at her students and mine. We have the same types of things. You know, as far as what the instructional strategies are and what the assessment strategies are. We are going to give extra time on their tasks. We are going to scribe for them if they need it. We are going to do all that. Like Linda said, we do move kids around to quiet spaces, giving extra time for tasks anyway.
Sara thinks that because IEPs are typically generic, IEPs are not as useful for teachers who are good at differentiating instruction as for those who are not. Sara admitted that IEPs enable the teachers to know what their students’ needs are. She also acknowledged IEPs as legal documents and that teachers have a professional responsibility to implement the IEP. She thinks that is why IEPs are “good”. Nevertheless, the IEPs are still “generic”.

David feels strongly that “we put way too many kids on IEPs nowadays”. David believes that because of his special education background, he can work with the students with special needs without an IEP. Therefore, in David’s opinion, IEPs are for teachers who do not know how to work with students with special needs and those who do not know their students’ individual needs. David said:

So the challenge is just not every teacher has expertise on special education so you will have to either (A) put this IEP aside for the year or (B) you work with the students and work with the parents to develop the child, and when they go to Grade 6 they go back to their IEPs, if the teacher from Grade 6 sees the need for an IEP.

When asked whether he found information stored in students IEPs written by the teacher from the previous year useful, David responded:

Oh yeah, but sometimes it’s not, sometimes the kids are on IEPs for no reason whatsoever. They are on IEPs because they have behavioural issues or they are on IEPs because the teacher feels they are not keeping up with the class in terms of academics. Sometimes that’s not accurate because… once again, based on my background, I can work with these kids without having them on an IEP.
David mentioned the drag-down boxes which appear on the IEPs like Sara did. David believes that the strategies chosen from these drag down boxes are way too general and not accurate. David added:

The IEPs have a lot of drag-down boxes. So you have to choose one of those drag-down boxes when you do the IEP. Sometimes it’s not accurate because it doesn't fit the students’ need. So going back to the benefits of the IEP, The IEPs are very beneficial if it’s accurate. If it’s inaccurate it becomes a headache it becomes a stress for the teacher, for the students, and for the child because you can put anything on an IEP and make it look good but does it benefit the child? Probably not.

Besides the reason that the strategies recorded on IEPs are generally generic and vague, David mentioned another aspect that compromises his use of IEPs in the classroom — low expectations set for the students which do not benefit students’ academic progress. David believes that the low expectations on the IEPs put students in a position where they feel too comfortable to push their limits and challenge themselves. David gave the example of a student who can actually sit for 10 minutes, but because this student’s IEP says that he needs to get up and move every 5 minutes, this student will use that IEP and actually get up and move every 5 minutes, which does no good to this student’s development. David believes that it is the teacher’s job to challenge and push the student’s limits. He thinks the IEPs are only beneficial when they have high expectations for the students and that they are carefully written. David thinks that the poorly written IEPs and IEPs which have low expectations for the students hinder the students’ natural development. He stated:

Going back to the computer and assistive technology and all that stuff, sometimes they rely too much on the computer and assistive technology, and it takes away from their natural
talent of doing the work, so you would actually get them to pull away from the computer, lessen your IEP and the expectations of the IEP, and do more class-based work…Sometimes they are saying their printing is not as good because they have been on the computer, well then how does their printing get better if you are on the computer all the time. So you will work with them in terms of their printing, and you know, give them more and more work… practice makes perfect.

The Support from Parents

When being asked the challenges of implementing the students’ IEPs, Linda talked about not having enough support from the parents:

Sometimes the parents are not supportive of having an IEP. They think it’s labeling of their child, but your child has a label whether he or she has an IEP or not. They have certain needs that need to be addressed. You cannot have it because you are not supporting your child. It’s there for your child it’s not there to … you know, give them label.

Regarding the topic of having parents’ support to implement students’ IEPs, Linda shared a story in which the parents did not see the need to put their child on an IEP whereas the teachers in the school had a different opinion. Because the teachers needed the consent from the parents in order to implement the IEP, the child ended up not having an IEP and therefore not enough academic support. Linda said:

I think there is something else going on and I would like to find out what it is. But the parents don’t want to. So there is nothing I can do about it. Because I can’t modify his program, he doesn’t have an IEP for modification; he is not showing me his best learning. He’s
not as successful as he could be because his program is not modified. I can only accommodate him because that’s what parents agreed to. So parents have to sign whether it’s modified or accommodated. That’s challenging because I know he is much more capable but the parents disagree. That is very frustrating. So it’s really helpful for the kids, but the parents are not on board.

In the later interview with Sara, Linda further expressed her frustration with the parents when they both were asked what they would do if they found strategies working really well but they were not listed on the students IEPs. Linda mentioned the importance of parents understanding the implementation of IEPs. She said:

Sometimes it’s frustrating for parents, speaking of the parents who are very aware of the IEP and expect you to just follow it … by the minute. If they don’t see the progress with their child, it’s frustrating for the parent: “They’re doing all this, but my child is not learning, why? What's going on?” And things take time, just because the child has an IEP, doesn’t mean that’s better, fixed. It will keep following this child throughout some years because that’s how this child learns. Some parents don’t realize that, they think IEPs are fixed.

**Instructional Flexibility**

Having talked about both the benefits and shortcomings of implementing the IEPs in general classrooms, it is important to understand the difference between the participants’ teaching with and without IEPs. All of my participants said that they will change the IEPs when the strategies recorded on the IEPs are outdated or simply are not working. Furthermore, all of them said that they will add the strategies that they found useful and add them to the IEPs. Linda said that
she would not only choose the strategies that work best for this particular student but also the whole class: “there is always a list of different strategies that you can use. We always use what’s best for ourselves, what suits our class.” If Linda found the IEPs are not working so well, she would talk to the parents about the students’ progress. She would also talk to special education teachers for suggestions and ideas to try.

When asked what kind of pedagogical adjustments Linda would make to respond to a student’s learning needs in a less than an ideal situation, Linda responded: “I do more observation”. Sara provided a similar response with a lot of detail concerning how she would respond to students’ learning needs. She described it as more “spur of the moment”. She said:

A lot of this stuff sort of happens in the moment when you are giving something and you realize that they are struggling or they can’t focus or they can’t do this or that. It might be something that we just do spur of the moment. So for some kids, it could be putting up… we’ve got like these dividers, so put one of those up, so they can’t… they are not being influenced by what’s going on around them, or moving them to another spot where they are by themselves, or they start something and we realize it’s too hard for them, maybe we take another piece of paper and we quickly write something where they have more of a scaffolding. So all they are really doing is filling in blanks of information or math or, you know. So a lot of that stuff… we don’t necessarily… I think even have the time to kind of sit and think “oh, we are going to try this and that”. It sort of just happens in the moment, depending on what the activity is.

When commenting on how he would work with the students with special needs without the help of IEPs, David said:
It’s just knowing your students. Then you’ll put the IEP aside, and you would talk to the student and let them know that this is their IEP. You can talk to the student about their IEP, tell them what their IEP has, but I don’t feel you need this, assistive device on a computer for example, I feel that you can actually do your work without being on the computer to assist you with everything you are doing in Language. And then you would give smaller and smaller tasks until they have built up to the expectations of the classroom. So you can take the device away from them.

**IEPs and Inclusive Education**

Lastly, my participants were invited to talk about how they perceive the relationship between IEPs and inclusive education. Linda mentioned during the interview that she would have a discussion in the class of how every one learns differently. She wanted to make sure that students with special needs were treated with respect by other students in her class. Linda added:

Definitely, of course it’s inclusive. They are part of the class. Just because they are struggling with something doesn’t mean they should be excluded. They are part of the class. They have a wealth of knowledge as well. Just because he or she can’t do a certain kind of work doesn’t mean they don’t have strengths in other areas. We all have something that we can bring to our group.

On the other hand, Sara, who is co-teaching with Linda, shared how having an IEP excludes the student from the rest of the class. Sara has a student who is on a modified IEP and this student goes to special education class in the morning. She shared an incident of this student finding the Math assignment that is for the rest of the class in his folder as well. This caused
panic and anxiety for this student because he had no idea what to do with it. Sara sees this exclusivity as a big challenge of building an inclusive classroom. Sara considers it crucial to include students with special needs as a part of what is going on in the classroom.

Sara also deems it important to give students with special needs the appropriate materials to work on in order to be inclusive. Sara mentioned that this year in her class, the students with special needs are significantly behind the other students. Most of time the content that she teaches caters to the students in her class without IEPs. Thus, she finds it challenging to make sure that the students with special needs feel a part of the class. The students especially felt excluded when they were given different tasks to work on from the other students. Linda said:

They are old enough to realize they are different. They are not doing what the other kids are doing. They don’t like being focused on that way “what I’m doing is different”. And the other kids know too. They don’t like that other kids know.

Sara considered it a challenge when “you can give them like Grade 1 work, but it can’t look like Grade 1 work, even though that might be the level that they are at in Grade 3 or 4”. However, Sara said that:

We have conversations with the whole class about people learning differently and expressing them differently and that’s fine and okay, and that everybody learns at different times and speeds.

David thinks that a truly inclusive classroom requires the support and effort from parents, school community, and all the personnel in the school. He said:

It could be very inclusive for the students and the learners as a whole. But it depends. It takes a lot of people to make a kid successful. It takes the parents, takes the school community, takes the teacher and it takes the resources around the school. If everyone is on the
same page and that child’s need has been met, then it’s inclusive learning and they would succeed properly.

My three participants’ stories provided holistic pictures of their teaching practice. They all differentiate their instruction in order to accommodate students with special needs in their class. Their stories show different levels of reliance on IEPs to guide their instruction. They had different challenges and successes when implementing the students’ IEPs in general classrooms but they all showed concern for the accuracy of the IEPs. They also all showed signs of instructional flexibility during the IEP implementation process, which will be further discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how general classroom teachers make use of IEPs in order to respond to their student’s special learning needs. The central research questions posed in this study were: 1) How do general classroom teachers perceive the usefulness of IEPs? 2) What are some of the benefits and challenges of implementing IEPs in general classrooms? 3) What influences the teachers’ pedagogical decisions in terms of supporting students with special needs in general classrooms? My motivation for conducting this research was to enrich my current understanding about inclusive education which, in turn, will inform my future teaching practice as a general classroom teacher.

Discussion of Findings

The Usefulness of IEPs

My three participants shared their insights into the usefulness of IEPs. They all emphasized the fact that the IEPs are the most helpful to both teachers and students when they are well written. Linda and Sara expressed concern that when the IEPs are not accurate, they are not helping them differentiate their instructions. Nor do they think that these inaccurate IEPs make a difference in the learning of students with special learning needs. Linda and Sara also said that IEPs are not of great help to them in terms of instructional significance because they “would differentiate their instructions anyway”. Their perspectives towards the usefulness of IEPs support the much earlier research findings made by Rhode (1983) who reported that special educators think that they could teach and the students would learn effectively without the help of IEPs. David
and Sara both mentioned the drop-off boxes when teachers are creating students’ IEPs which, according to them, generalize the description of the students and fail to meet the purpose of individualizing their education. Sara even mentioned that when she was comparing two students’ IEPs whose identification of special needs are significantly different from one another, somehow the instructional strategies on their IEPs are highly similar. Additionally, Linda and Sara mentioned that they used strategies recorded on IEPs of students with special needs to accommodate other students in the class. According to Ontario Ministry document The Individual Education Plan A Resource Guide 2004, an IEP is a document of particular accommodations designated for particular students. However, the fact that is being revealed here is that Individualized Educational Plan is not as individualized as it is intended to be, which echoes Blackwell & Rossetti’s (2014) claim that IEPs are not individualized based on students’ needs.

It is apparent that David does not regard IEPs as very helpful to him. The reason might be that David has a special education specialist background so he knows how to work with students with special needs without the help of IEPs. It was also clear that he deemed IEPs necessary for other teachers, especially for those who do not have “expertise on special education”. His opinions back up those of previous researchers such as Carroll, Forlin, Jobling (2003) and Shippen, Crites, Houchins et al. (2000) who reported a clear difference between the confidence level of the teachers who had training and those who did not. Despite his concerns regarding the accuracy of IEPs, David thinks that IEPs, in a way, lower the expectations for the students which in turn, hinders their natural development. David thinks it is the teacher’s responsibility to challenge the students and push their academic boundaries whereas IEPs provides the “comfort zone” for students with special needs.

Benefits and Challenges when Implementing IEPs
My three participants also shared their own teaching experiences in terms of the success and challenges when implementing students’ IEPs in general classrooms. Linda and Sara think that implementing students’ IEPs in general classrooms does not only make them more aware of the needs of students with special needs but also the learning needs of other students. They also agreed that when the IEPs are accurate and well-written, they benefited from the IEPs when using them to differentiate instruction. Linda and Sara’s point of view confirmed that of Dildine’s (2010) who suggested that using an IEP as a tool can help a teacher better understand the needs of the students and help the teacher to differentiate instructions. In addition, Linda and Sara both agreed that having an IEP makes students with special needs feel much safer in the class as they know what is expected of them.

There were also some other factors that hinder the implementation of IEPs such as insufficient time to make use of the strategies recorded on students’ IEPs. Having to modify curriculum and find extra resources also adds to their workload. Lack of understanding and support from parents is another barrier added to implementing the IEPs. Sara thinks that having students with special needs in her class increases the difficulty of being inclusive as the students with special needs go to HSP class for half of the day and thus miss class activities. However, she also suggests that under such circumstances, teachers should always keep the students informed of what is going on in the class so they wouldn’t feel left out.

*Instructional Flexibility*

When asked questions regarding instructional flexibility and what affects their instructional decision-making, my three participants all said that when they find strategies recorded on students’ IEPs not working very well or simply out-dated, they would seek alternative strategies to
support the students with special needs. In addition, Sara and Linda mentioned that in spite of what is recorded on students’ IEPs, they responded to the students’ special learning needs based on the whole class activity, the teacher’s availability, or what works the best for that student under specific circumstances. Sara mentioned that this decision-making is something that they do “spur of the moment” which indicates that education is subject to situational changes. David made a very strong point that teachers should always pay attention to the natural growth of students and make changes according to it instead of fixating on a prescribed educational plan. David mentioned taking students away from the computers in order to practice their printing skills despite the fact that this student has computer use as listed accommodation on the IEP. He also talked about lessening IEPs and the expectations of IEPs and giving the students with special needs more “class-based work” instead. It’s possible that this suggests that David may not consider the accommodation of using the computer to be legitimate class work or entirely helpful. Perhaps he sees the accommodations for students with special needs and class-based work as two different and separate things. This notion is also found in the literature as Rhode (1983) reported that special educators think that they could teach and that students could learn effectively without IEPs and according to Joseph, Lindgren, Creamer, and Lane (1983) teachers did not view IEPs as something that is worth the time and effort they put into it. In fact, it is often the case that the accommodations listed on IEPs are produced based on a lot of careful thought, consideration and consultation with other educational professionals, including formal testing in most circumstances. Inclusive education does not mean to simply physically include the students with special needs in general classrooms but to provide the students necessary accommodations so that they are afforded with chance to succeed equal to their non-special counterparts. As research suggests, inclusion is now interpreted as full participation not only socially but also academically as
it provides that students with special needs are entitled to equitable educational opportunities (Gallagher, 2001).

Implications/Recommendations

Implications for the Researcher

It was around the time that I just started to live in Canada that I started to work on my MTRP. When I first began to develop the ideas for this research, I had many moments of doubt. Because of my very limited living and educational experience in Canada, aligning with the fact that there was not much previous research done on this topic, I was unsure if this topic was even worth looking into. However, I knew that this is a subject that I wanted to find out more about because IEP was a mystery to me at that time. Having been an educator in China for 6 years, I had never dealt with a single IEP document or documents that are similar to IEP before because of the different educational system there. It was the thirst to know more about special education in Canada that drove me to carry on with my research.

The continuous two-year research on the topic of IEPs broadened and deepened my understanding of special education as well as inclusive education to a great extent. During the process, I found out that as well-intended as IEPs are designed, they do not come without their own problems. As educators, however, instead of focusing a great deal of attention on the problems of the IEPs, we should find ways to make them work. After all, the IEPs are written by the teachers. Molto (2003) and Lee-Tarver (2006) suggested necessary training for teachers and other educators on the development and implement of IEPs. In order to make the IEPs more specific and accurate, teachers should also actively and positively seek additional information regarding students with special needs from their parents or previous teachers. When necessary, teachers
should also seek out extra resources and additional support in order to better serve the students with special needs. The needs of these students cannot be overlooked in general classrooms. In addition to my learning on the topic of inclusive education and IEPs, this research has also confirmed my belief that teaching is complicated and subject to situational changes and the growth of the students.

*Implications for the Educational Community*

The three stories of how my three participants implement students’ IEPs raised concern about the usefulness of IEPs. It was obvious that my three participants did not find IEPs very helpful. Linda and Sara think that they would differentiate their instructions anyway and they were good at it so IEPs were not very helpful. David said that his expertise in special education allows him to work with students with special needs without the help of IEPs. Therefore, one implication for the educational community is that IEPs should be more individualized and specific in terms of student-related information. Instructional flexibility was also looked into in my study. Ontario Ministry IEP Resource Guide specifically outlines that it is the responsibilities of all teachers to carry out the IEP but not be restricted in using strategies other than the content recorded on IEPs (Ontario Ministry of Education document The Individual Education Plan (IEP) A Resource Guide Phase 4: Implement the IEP, 2004). According to the document, a teacher should make reasonable adjustment to the IEP based on the continuous and ongoing assessment of the student. However, what the document has not outlined is how and to what extent the instructions are flexible.
Nowadays classroom teachers have taken on the responsibility of writing IEP’s. However, they often feel ill-equipped to do so because of the lack of relevant knowledge and training towards special education. Even though there are previous researchers claiming positive changes resulted from teachers’ professional training, Baglieri (2008) questioned the effectiveness of information-based training provided for preservice teachers in the change of their attitude and comfort level regarding educating students with special needs. Therefore, another implication for the educational community would be that there is a need for ongoing training for teachers in terms of how they view disability and how to better assist students with disabilities along with the information-based training.

Further Study

An issue that was raised during the process of conducting this research was the supervision of the implementation of IEPs. During the interview, David mentioned that when he had students with special needs in his class, he was able to “put the IEP aside” and work with the students for a whole year and write the IEP at the end of the school year if the next teacher of the student “sees the need for an IEP”. However, an IEP is a legal document and it is every teacher’s legal duty to implement the IEP. So my suggestion for further study is to look into the supervision of the implementation of the IEPs including the supervision of the instructional flexibility of implementing the IEPs.

Conclusion

For general classroom teachers, it is important to know how to make use of students’ IEPs. IEPs should be products of careful consultation and collaboration between special education ex-
Running Head: IEP USE

experts, classroom teachers, parents, students and other related personnel. The information recorded on an IEP should be accurate and specific. Classroom teachers should carry out students’ IEPs in a continuous and consistent manner. However, classroom teachers should not stop seeking alternative strategies to better meet the needs of students with special needs. Simply rigidly following IEPs will compromise the intention of what IEPs are written for: to provide the child with individualized education so that the child can be successful academically (Dildine, 2010). Only with the guidance of the IEP, along with the use of other appropriate developmental strategies tailored to the needs of the individual student, can the purpose of inclusive education be met. The three teacher participants in this study provided a glimpse into how general classroom teachers in Ontario make use of their students’ IEPs to inform their instruction and to create a more inclusive classroom for their students.
References


Saunders, S. E. R., & DeBeer, Y. A brief introduction to inclusion, inclusive schools and barriers to inclusion.


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ____________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying how general classroom teachers implement students’ IEPs for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Mary Lynn Tessaro. My research supervisor is Dr. Shelley Murphy. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, or another private and professional location that you might prefer. The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my colleagues and/or potentially at a conference or in a publication.

This study will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in any written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor, my research group members, and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,
Qingqing Liu
Phone number: 647 868 0067
cqmaggeliu@hotmail.com
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Qingqing Liu and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________

Name (printed): ____________________________

Date: ____________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. My research topic looks into the how general classrooms teachers implement students’ IEPs. This interview will be no longer than 45 minutes long and I will be asking you 11 questions in total. Please feel free to ask for clarification at any time during the interview. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Professional Background:

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. How many students in your classroom this year have IEPs?

3. Have you received any training or professional development specifically for supporting students with special needs in general classrooms?

Introduction to use of IEPs:

4. Can you talk about how, in general, you plan for and differentiate your instruction to ensure that all students are able to access the curriculum, regardless of their diverse learning needs?

5. Can you describe the ways that you use the IEP to guide your instruction and assessment?

6. Can you give a specific example of how you use an IEP for one of your students in the classroom?

Implementing IEPs:

7. What are some of the challenges, if any, that you have experienced when you are implementing the IEP?

8. Can you describe a specific example of how you respond to a student’s learning needs when strategies recorded in his/her IEP were not working so well?

9. What are some of the benefits, if any, that have resulted from having an IEP to help guide your instruction for students with identified needs?
10. How do you feel about the accommodations/modifications/strategies recorded in the IEP in terms of how they help or don't help you to support your students with identified needs?

11. What do you think is the perceived link between students’ IEPs and effective inclusive education practice?

12. Do you have anything else to share?