

Parents' Understanding on the Implementation of Individualized Education Programme

Nora Mislan, Azlina Kosnin, Yeo Kee Jiar, Hamdan Said, Dayang Tiawa Awang Haji Hamid

Faculty of Education
University Technology Malaysia, Skudai
81310 UTM, Skudai, Johor Darul Ta'zim, Malaysia.
e-mail: noramislan@yahoo.com.sg
e-mail: amkosnin@yahoo.co.uk
e-mail: kjyeo_utm@yahoo.com
e-mail: p-hamdan@utm.my
e-mail: drdayang@utm.my

Abstract—Focus in special education in Malaysia started in the 1920s with the opening of a national school catering for the blind in one of its states. Parents' involvement should be one of the important elements that provide effective education programme for students with special needs. Individualized education programme (IEP) gives parents the opportunity to be advocates for their children's education and their rights in learning. This study aimed to investigate parents' understanding on their roles in IEP implementation. Based on the interviews, it was found that parents understood that IEP was meant to cater to individual needs of their children. They also believed that IEP requires their support in order for their children to benefit and to further improve their abilities. The overall mean score obtained for parents' understanding based on the questionnaire was 3.85, indicating a high level of understanding on IEP implementation.

Keywords-special education, parents, IEP

I. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, an array of services are available for parents to choose for their children ranging from special schools and programmes run by Coalition of Societies for Persons with Disabilities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or in inclusive classes in normal schools. The government, acting in the best interest of the students with special needs should give attention to the education needs of these students in all states and in diverse economic conditions through both national and non profit organization schools. The Ministry of Education has put priority on special needs education thus it is recognized that educational needs are difficult to be met unless individualized attention is given to these students.

Malaysia, being one of the state parties of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions [1], should also ensure that the potential of these students will be developed to their fullest. Taking into account the vast individual differences among students with special needs, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should be prepared to cater for individual learning needs which are vital in preparing effective learning programme. According to Gartin and Murdick [2] as mentioned in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 [3], apart from

exploring students' potential, IEP should also consider the concerns of the parents and to pool as much information from them about their children in order to address every aspect of the students' development and behavioral plans.

The role of parents whose children require special education needs is claimed to be well documented [4; 5]. Reynolds and Clement [6] highlighted that areas of improvements to be made in parental involvement are currently being addressed in many educational programmes and policies. In Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 [7] has further strengthened parents' role and right in becoming equal partners as the teachers in making decision on their children' education. National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities [8] stresses that parents also have the right to dispute or request any decision made in relation to the identification, evaluation or placement of their children. Schools should be aware that if parents' appeal is denied, they have the right to a hearing.

II. PARENTS' ROLES IN IEP

In a study done in Malaysia to find out about parents' roles in special education, Noraini [9] stressed that parents need to discuss with teachers about their children's interests during IEP meetings or as and when they deemed required. She added that parents should not set their expectations too high and let academic achievements become yardstick in their children's development. In her working paper, she also mentioned on the needs for parents to expand their knowledge, skills and abilities in order to keep up with changes and improvements made in the education of their children.

Baker and Soden [10] found, in more than 200 research studies, many methodological limitations in research designs due to lacking in capacity to separate the effects of parent involvement from that of other programme and incoherent definitions of parent involvement. Nevertheless, parental involvement should be supported as it brings about positive effect on the students' attitudes and success in school [11]. Parents' vital role should not be ignored or teachers will fail to benefit from a potentially powerful source of support for themselves [12].

According to the Learning Disabilities Council [13] manual, if parents should undertake their role as advocates for their children, they will realize that it is not a skill which they learn and use for a while but should be employed throughout the years. The manual also added that parents shall play their roles as facilitators, coordinators and overseer notwithstanding of how effective the school programme maybe or how competent the teachers are.

Gordon and Breivogel [14] have provided an early model in the seventies through their observations of parents and families participation in the school community. They underlined five common roles of parents and the first one being parents acting as audience whereby they watch their children's performances only as spectators. Second, they act as direct and active teachers to their children at home. Following that, parents served as volunteers and also as paid employees. Finally, parents served as decision makers in their children education programme.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The main objective of this research was to look into parents' perceived roles in IEP implementation as it is one of the most crucial factors in the bid to improve on the services provided for students with learning disabilities.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed method design in which both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to investigate on parents' understanding on their roles in IEP. Two types of instruments were used namely the semi-structured interview questions and questionnaires. A total of 31 parents whose children were involved in IEP at the school were given the questionnaire. However, only 26 parents returned the questionnaires. Although ten parents volunteered to participate in the interview session, data collected were based on interview sessions with five of the parents as data were saturated at this point. Interviewing the parents required them to give their fullest cooperation and being open in giving their feedback.

V. FINDINGS

Parents were also asked to share their views on their understanding in IEP implementation. When parents were asked on their understanding in IEP, they reiterated two significant themes which are: a) individualized learning and b) IEP needs parents' support. Interestingly, the second theme quoted on their belief that IEP required their understanding and support to materialize the goals. They understood that they needed to be actively involved and thus to do follow up with the activities with their children at home.

All the parents quoted that IEP catered to their children's individual learning needs. Table I provides their excerpts in this perspective.

TABLE I. IEP AS INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING

Respondents	Interview Excerpts
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Respondents	Interview Excerpts
P1	I understand what IEP is. Teachers cater to my daughter's individual needs.
P2	When I attend the meetings, I understand that IEP focuses on my child's individual development. The school's idea is okay.
P3	When my child first entered the school, they explain to me about IEP. They said that there are many students in the class and teachers cannot focus on one student at one time. With such programme, more attention can be given to the students and they have higher percentage to improve further.
P4	I know that IEP helps in my son's individual need.
P5	IEP is individualized learning. So, one teacher can teach one student in detail at one time... This is between the teacher and the children and thus the children are able to understand better. Teachers give and students receive... It can be in the national language, gross motor skill or anything else that they can teach in detail to our children. Attention can be given to the students alone around half an hour to forty-five minutes or so.

Parents understood that IEP was meant as an individualized learning. They recognized that individual attention was given to their children during the sessions. They commended on the benefits that could be gained from the IEP. The parents believed that IEP is a good plan and they appreciated the efforts made by the school and teachers. They acknowledged that IEP could cater to their children's individual needs as students in class have different abilities. As such, individual attention could be given during IEP sessions. Parents knew that since there were many students in the class, individualized attention would not be possible. They also believed that under such circumstances, the chances for their children to progress in their development would be higher.

Parents seemed to understand that IEP focuses on the various aspects of development of their children prioritizing on their immediate need to acquire certain skills to become independent. Parents were also aware that IEP for their children did not only serve the academic aspects. Self-help skills would also be catered to base on their children's needs. Parents understood that their children have limitations in their learning abilities and thus stressed on the need for them to learn to become independent instead of drilling them to read and write.

All parents also mentioned that they need to give their support in IEP implementation. Their excerpts are presented in Table II.

TABLE II. IEP NEEDS PARENTS' SUPPORT

Respondents	Interview Excerpts
P1	If parents can take part and stimulate our children together than I feel it won't be difficult. We have to observe how teachers carry out the activities and we practice it at home. I cannot go frequently too but I will ask the teachers and look at the report.
P2	That is my responsibility as a parent. We have to be involved. Maybe not so much to my child who is normal. But IEP for this daughter is important. I want to give my focus on her.
P3	The teachers and I have to train my child together so that he can understand him better.
P4	I feel that teachers must keep parents updated. I don't want to say who is responsible for such thing but parents need to know.
P5	I need to know what teachers have taught my son in school so that I can support and carry out similar activities at home to strengthen his understanding. For me, usually I will ask the teachers.

Parents believed that IEP activities are comprehensible. They added that it was not that difficult to understand the programme if parents themselves use their own initiatives to enhance their knowledge in it. Parents also realized that they need to carry out the IEP activities at home to further strengthen their children's skills. Therefore, it is important for them to participate and be actively involved in IEP implementation. Statements from the parents during the interview sessions portrayed their views well.

Parents acknowledged on the focus of IEP and understood that it was meant to improve on their children's development in various aspects. This might be due to their involvement and experience in IEP implementation. Parents understood that IEP catered to their children's individual needs and that IEP could meet various learning needs of their children. Parents believed that more could be achieved if they were more actively involved in their children's education. They thought that they should take their own initiatives to increase their understanding of this programme.

VI. QUANTITATIVE OUTPUT OF PARENTS' UNDERSTANDING IN IEP

The quantitative findings on parents understanding on IEP implementation are reported in Table 3. The overall mean score obtained for parents' understanding was 3.85, indicating a high level of understanding on IEP implementation. Mean scores for items related to parents understanding on IEP were between 3.12 and 4.54. This range was in the moderate and high levels. Mean scores were high for item 24 (IEP is an effective process to determine the services and attention required by my child), item 23 (IEP allows me get updated information on my child's

development), and item 21 (I can identify the strengths and weaknesses of my child from the IEP process). Among the items, the lowest mean derived (which are in the moderate range) are item 2c (*I feel challenged in the IEP process when I have to understand all the documentation presented by the teachers) with the mean of 2.88. Apart from the item, item 1 (I feel that I am knowledgeable in many aspects in the IEP process) with the mean of 3.12 and item 4 (The time provided weekly for my child in IEP is sufficient) with the mean of 3.42 were among the lowest.

No.	Item	SD %	MD %	SLA %	MA %	SA %	Mean	Std
1	I feel that I am knowledgeable in many aspects in the IEP process.	7.7	11.5	46.2	30.8	3.8	3.12	.95
2c	I feel challenged in the IEP process when I have to understand all the documentation presented by the teachers.	19.2	15.4	26.9	34.6	3.8	2.88	1.21
4	The time provided weekly for my child in the IEP is sufficient.	7.7	3.8	34.6	46.2	7.7	3.42	.99
8	I believe that I truly understand the process in implementing IEP.	7.7	-	19.2	42.3	30.8	3.88	1.11
20a	I refer to the goals and objectives in IEP that have been determined when reviewing the assessment done on my child weekly, monthly or end of the term.	-	-	26.9	23.1	50.0	4.23	.86
20c	I refer to the goals and objectives in IEP that have been determined when receiving their progress reports.	3.8	-	38.5	30.8	26.9	3.77	.99
21	I can identify the strengths and weaknesses of my child from the IEP process.	-	7.7	3.8	34.6	53.8	4.35	.89
23	IEP allows me to get updated information on my child's development.	-	7.7	-	34.6	57.7	4.42	.86

24	IEP is an effective process to determine the services and attention required by my child.	-	7.7	-	23.1	69.2	4.54	.86
	Total						34.65	
	Overall mean						3.85	

VII DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Parents had gained an invaluable understanding on the purpose of IEP through their experience of getting involved in its implementation. They knew that their support is needed in IEP implementation. This could be evident in their high overall mean value of 3.85. Teachers and the principal of the school might have played a major role in this aspect. They probably had explained clearly the IEP implementation to parents. This might have elevated the parents' understandings. Parents might also have gained from their observations throughout the IEP process as well as getting information from other parents who were involved in IEP. Parents need to be aware that they could voice their concerns in their children's development and discussed them with the teachers in IEP [15].

They also understood that activities should be planned based on their children's individual needs. Parents recognized that apart from meeting the academic needs of their children, more importantly, IEP should also cater to the functional needs of their children. This is parallel to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [16] which had added new requirements to encourage students' independence.

In Rainforth and York-Barr's [17] research, it was found that parents were usually left with little understanding on IEP implementation as well as the contents of the documents involved. However, parents in this study had shown that they understood IEP implementation. Parents involved in IEP were briefed by the principal and teachers on different occasions including during meetings. Handouts specifically on IEP had also been distributed to all parents involved. Teachers had also explained the contents of the documents before or after the meetings. Therefore, understanding IEP should not be an issue to parents although there is a need to address the constraints and limitations in their involvement.

Parents added that IEP required their support in order to be carried out effectively. Despite this, the principal thought that although parents might know that their support was needed, they face work or family constraints that restricted their involvement. Although parents showed that they understood IEP implementation and believed their support is crucial, they could not become active participants in the programme due to other commitments.

The researchers believe that parents should be responsible for their children's education, thus they should

set their priorities accordingly. They might have to exercise a little discretion in managing their time well in order to be able to assist their children's learning at home. This factor leads to the roles they need to play in IEP implementation which will be discussed later. Lack of parents' support can be mitigated by instilling self-awareness amongst them that understanding IEP without carrying their roles out accordingly will hinder its success. In addition, the school needs to encourage parents' participation in IEP and assist them in carrying out their responsibilities thus enhancing their competencies [18]. As Villa et al. [19] had mentioned, parents' involvement in programme such as IEP is essential, school and teachers need to constantly be sensitive to families' needs. Therefore, school and teachers should find the best ways to entice parents to contribute their time and effort in IEP implementation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank all the individuals who have contributed to this research. Special thanks to the school principal, teachers and parents involved in this study.

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