Individual Education Plans (IEP)
Individual Education Plans: Charting the Future

The goal for inclusive education is to widen access to education and to promote full participation and opportunities for all learners vulnerable to exclusion to realize their potential.¹

Notwithstanding the introduction of the Code of Practice and the guidance on drawing up Individualised Education Plans (IEPs), pupils with special educational needs remain the most vulnerable pupils in the education system. IEPs which were designed to bridge the gap between educational success and low and underachievement through curriculum access, have been developed too narrowly and in isolation to the wider understanding of pupils’ learning styles and preference and educational interests and engagement. The standards achieved by these pupils remain largely unchanged as evidenced by the poor levels of literacy and numeracy of a minority of pupils identified nationally and in the Chief Inspector’s report (2008-2010).

Evaluation of IEPs in schools may lack rigour and reflection. Teachers vary in the number of IEPs they prepare over the year, over the format and content, and significantly, struggle to identify appropriate targets particularly at the post-primary level. Too much reliance is placed on commercially prepared IEPs and undue similarity and rewording is evident from one to another. At their best, IEPs are understood by all staff, parents and pupils and are used actively to inform lessons and assist evaluation. Classroom assistants are frequently deployed to assist a pupil to achieve set targets and, at times, relied on as the sole intervention. Too often IEPs are completed for the sake of meeting a policy requirement, short term, subject based and lack measureable outcomes.

Charting the future of IEPs must begin with a clear definition of what IEPs are expected to do.

¹ Key Principles for Promoting Quality in Inclusive Education. European Agency for Development in Special needs Education, 2010
To be clear, the intention of the IEP is to build access to the curriculum for the pupil. In most schools this has been interpreted to mean a separation of the curriculum content into small chunks for the pupils to follow. This suggests that such action will enable the pupil to engage with the curriculum and make progress. Nothing could be further from the truth; teachers are already clearly able to do this without an IEP and plan for class lessons by knowing what each pupil can achieve. Teaching notes are the place where such curriculum differentiation should be written and followed; surely at post-primary level the course curriculum directs the content anyway. What is needed is a learning plan to ensure pupils engage with the curriculum and learn.

*Dividing the content of the curriculum into small chunks does not constitute an IEP: targets which state what has to be learned undermine quality curriculum planning and differentiation.*

Schools and classroom, by their very nature, promote learning in social settings: individual study, paired working, small group activity and whole class participation. Meeting the needs of pupils who find learning difficult or learn differently or who are challenged by the climate of the school and classroom, cannot be solved simply by writing an IEP which does not address the social setting of a school and the significance of learning in the company of peers.

*The preoccupation with academic learning without due consideration of the pastoral and emotional wellbeing of the pupil may improve learning but will do little to encourage the pupil to develop the skills needed to become an independent learner with the capacity to work alone, with a partner or as a member of a larger group.*

A further preoccupation is with literacy and numeracy as the only elements of the IEP. While raising a pupil’s level of literacy and numeracy is of central importance, the IEP is not a check list of things the pupil has to learn such as a frequent word list, key words and subject specific words. This word bank approach has wrongly led teachers and, particularly post primary subject teachers, to regard the IEP as a record of the capacity of the pupil to increase the number of words s/he can spell and write. In other instances, teachers regard literacy and numeracy as the domain of the SENCO or the English or
As a result, withdrawal is seen as the catch up time when words can be drilled home and understood. Such activity may have a place in providing individualized support but it does not constitute by any means the answer to the IEP.

**IEPs are not checklists: increasing a pupil’s vocabulary does not ensure s/he will use or apply him/herself to a learning task or take an interest in the curriculum**

Across schools there is variation in the degree of involvement of the pupil in the IEP process. Pupils, in growing numbers it must be said, are able to name their IEP targets; most can tell what targets they have achieved and how these are helping them in class but few are encouraged to identify the targets they would like to achieve over the longer term.

**Involving the pupils in the IEP process is more than telling him/her what should be learned.**

What is required is a new approach which challenges the huge emphasis placed on outcomes and endless re-writing of targets in different words or styles. The use of IEPs in isolation to the motivating experience and enjoyment of a lesson activity cannot be productive. Schools need to exploit their professional capacity to identify individual needs and decide what action will lead to improving the pupil’s ability to learn and to do so alongside others in a mutually respective manner. We have heard of the term removing the barriers to learning …the perfect IEP should state how.

**Focusing on finding out how a pupil learns and securing his/her sense of wellbeing should promote the IEP more effectively.**

What this guide suggests is a long forgotten, yet seasoned maxim, which places teaching at the heart of learning and redefines the IEP as a practical framework capable of identifying and tracking a pupil’s level of understanding and participation in the learning process. In this effort, achievements and standards are less likely to be contrived and more likely to be mutually appreciated between teacher and pupil.
Has the IEP reached its sell-by date?

In its present form, the IEP is a distraction to effective teaching but pupils still need individual help and support. So much confusion surrounds the IEP and under the review of special educational needs it is clear that schools need to revisit the concept. The heart of raising standards is to bring back the importance of the teaching experience from which genuine outcomes flow. A plea for structured but imaginative lessons of a very good or outstanding quality is the essential ingredient in keeping the pupils in learning mode and ensuring purposeful learning.

A focus on outcomes without consideration of the learning experiences of an effective lesson does little to consolidate and generate learning interest.

Is the IEP a stand alone document?

No longer should this be the case...individualised support and learning in the form of a learning support framework is more appropriate. IEPs are not static, improvement begins as the pupil enters the school building: ambience, working relationships, security and confidence in what is ahead does much to make the environment a seat of learning acceptable to the pupil.

Whole school thinking securing an inclusive ethos must be actively developed and respected by staff and pupils alike.

IEPs must be a part of, and not apart from, the heart of a school’s inclusive approach to learning and achievement.
What then is the learning framework or policy which can positively promote learning for all and focus on removing the barriers to achievement and social and personal confidence?

Answering this question should be the more important item on the school’s agenda as it is from this point that standards for all will improve.

The Rules for Developing a Learning Policy or Framework

The promotion of positive attitudes in education is crucial for widening participation.

Planning to meet needs or address the variety of learning styles and capabilities in a school can begin with a clear understanding and agreement on the procedures and rationale on which provision is identified and deployed.

**Rule 1:** Defining the policy of the school as an inclusive learning and social environment requires leadership and vision, active professional discussion and debate about what constitutes SEN and what is meant by intervention: a policy of Inclusive learning.

The process of individual planning is just that a process: the removal of learning barriers is essential to the process and should be anchored by a comprehensive diagnostic assessment of a pupil’s primary learning modes.

**Rule 2:** Baseline assessment is the first element of the learning framework.

A view of learning as process—not content based—and a main goal for all learners being the development of learning to learn skills, not just subject knowledge.
Baseline assessment must also identify the social and behavioural well being of the pupil. Observation and collation of evidence from a variety of sources is one way of establishing the range of barriers to address at a whole school and classroom level.

**Baseline assessment key questions:**

i. How does the pupil learn?

ii. What has the pupil already learned as shown by his literacy and numeracy performance and education history?

iii. What is the pupil's learning behaviour in class, during lessons and across subjects?

iv. What evidence is there to indicate the pupil's level of confidence as a learner and capacity to learn alongside others both collaboratively and in competitive modes.

**Capacity building:**

i. Whole school awareness training and policy understanding of learning.

ii. Learning manager training for the SENCO or senior staff.

iii. Professional involvement of allied professionals eg educational psychology/social services.

iv. Working links with feeder (pre-) schools and parents/carers.

Training for inclusion involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills in differentiation and meeting diverse needs that allows a teacher to support individual learning in classrooms.
Rule 3: Establish a learning profile for the pupil based on assessment and collated information.

Teacher assessment that supports learning and does not label or lead to negative consequences for learners. Assessment should take a holistic/ecological view that considers academic, social and emotional aspects of learning and clearly informs next steps in the learning process.1

Discussion of the pupil’s learning performance among key staff, including assistants, will promote the importance of shared responsibility and accountability. Meetings to do this should be formalized and regular to build into the assessment action a sense of collective interest and sharp focus on how best to plan the teaching input and measure the impact of the intervention and the quality of teaching.

Rule 4: Identify the pupil’s strengths and areas for improvement in literacy and numeracy and set targets as skills to be developed to enable the pupil to engage effectively with learning.

In meeting this commitment, it is essential that the learning manager/SENCO is competent and skilled in the area of assessment and profiling, particularly if the pupil displays complex learning and/or poor social confidence and experiences. Collaborating to decide on effective teaching approaches based on alternative routes to learning highlights the flexibility needed to meet individual needs. This approach ensures that the IEP is integral to the classroom curriculum and whole school inclusion policy. This action may require flexible rates of time and content to enable pupils to complete given tasks. The ultimate aim is to reduce the gaps between the pupil with SEN and his/her peers.

Capacity building:

i. Whole school training in collaborative working and case conferencing.

ii. Whole school screening for literacy and numeracy.
iii. Learning manager/SENCO specialised training in diagnostic testing and interpretation of results

**Rule 5:** Include a descriptor of the pupil’s social and behavioural competences in the IEP which can be tracked in the work of the school and across learning activities.

*Collaborative problem solving involving systematic approaches to positive classroom management*

Much work has been done by schools to create an ethos of pastoral care and child protection. When applied to social and behavioural competences, this means the provision of a rich learning and welcoming curriculum environment that fosters the interdependent strands of assessment, high-quality teaching, personalised learning and transition pathways.

**Capacity building:**

i. Staff awareness training in understanding and recognising social, emotional and behaviour variations;

ii. Access to counselling and mentoring support, including peer tutoring training for nominated pupils.

**Post-primary specific:** Write learning guidance for subject teachers to ensure continuity and cohesion across classes

Inclusive learning and classroom practice improves the attention and concentration of learners through the sharing of common tasks. In this instance, assessment enables learning and avoids emphasis on the weakness or deficiencies of poor performance. This is also key to promoting pastoral wellbeing and esteem. Through collaborative working the positive aspects of learning are consistently applied across
all classes and subjects. Such consistency provides a secure sense of belonging and lessens the likelihood of challenge and misbehaviour.

Rule 6: Involve the pupil in the learning process

Co-operative learning where learners help each other in different ways – including peer tutoring – within flexible and well-thought out learner groupings

Examples of older pupils helping young pupils are quite frequent in the primary schools and study monitors in the post primary sector is a growing strategy to inclusive learning. Efforts to include all pupils in extra curricular activities, such as after schools clubs, are a further example of the inclusive ethos of a school in practice. All pupils should recognize their learning strengths and weakness and teaching approaches should be explored to enable pupils to realize the importance of developing their learning skills. This is particularly so in mathematics where the teacher has the opportunity to generate and probe the pupils understanding of the variety of ways to solve a problem. Support for a pupil struggling with number for example, is not improved through more drill and repetitive work sheet tasks. Obliging the pupils to share how they think and solve learning tasks will do more to build the mathematical skills for learning and learning application.

Capacity building:

i. Raise staff awareness of education as a social process which promotes diversity and underlines support as guidance and acceptable and not as a deficit approach which can segregate one pupil from another

Rule 6: Establish a system for recording and reporting progress to staff, pupils, parents and carers.

There is a tendency by teachers to write and record in a style which is meaningful to them. Often scrutiny of notes and recording systems is time consuming and cumbersome. Effort is needed to promote a common format of
recording and reporting in a way which can communicate and inform easily and with little doubt as to progress and practice.

Ways for engaging schools, teachers and the wider community in the processes of common recording and reporting would promote further the transition process and area learning co-operation.

**Rule 7:** *Evaluate individual progress against baseline assessment and specifically in literacy and numeracy.*

It is important to measure the progress each pupil makes in literacy and numeracy and the extent to which s/he uses their learning across the curriculum. Equally important is the evaluation of how well the pupil feels safe and secure in the school and develops the social and emotional competence to plan their careers pathway with confidence and purpose.

**Rule 8:** *Case conference and annual review discussion of progress to inform further work and to celebrate progress.*

Case conferencing and annual review procedures are a method of ensuring targets are prioritized and constantly evaluated. The involvement of a group of professionals promotes the sharing of responsibility and accountability. This approach also provides a professional forum for group evaluation of the intervention provision and is focused on changing assessment from a deficit to a guidance and support model where a competence based-approach maintains the learning support input as a process and not an event. Thus pupils who are registered on the SEN register should only remain registered when the assessment process cannot identify a learning pathway which can ensure inclusion and learning progress. In such an approach, the SEN register should be more fluid and less stigmatizing.

**Capacity building:**

i. Staff training in participating in case conferencing and learning from other professionals
Rule 9: **Whole school analysis of data to inform policy and practice**

Developing a set of indicators as benchmarks of effective practice enables teachers to improve their working approaches through audit and data comparison. The SEN Indicators included in this booklet are a tool to help schools baseline their provision and focus on the process of improvement. Collating and analysing data enhances this process and measures the impact of the interventions against long term outcomes and targets. The process also enables senior learning managers /SENCOs to evaluate the extent to which the school has developed its inclusive learning practices. The analysis should also inform what individual pupils need to learn and how best they can learn it. Focusing on what is appropriate data is indispensible to dealing with the holistic needs of pupils and should not be confused solely with academic progress.

**Capacity building:**

i. Staff development in recording data for retrieval and analysis.

ii. Senior staff training in data analysis and interpretation

Rule 10: **Informing the Learning Framework**

An important consideration emerging from the Learning Framework is that annual review of the learning and teaching support for SEN should be a central aspect of staff development. Effective evaluation should contribute to the school’s culture of inclusive working and help narrow the gap in achievement between pupils with SEN and their peers.
Summarising the Learning Framework

The IEP within the described framework is a planning, teaching, reviewing tool, which includes two parts:

- Part 1 - a learning profile of the pupil detailing generic learning strategies to underpin planning for all lessons and indicators to ensure the pupil’s effective inclusion in the learning environment: a generic and personalized learning planner;

- Part 2 - a document with literacy and numeracy specific targets linked to the overall skills needed to enable the pupil to access the wider curriculum;

- a working document for teaching staff;

- a document guided/underpinned by an overarching long term aim, with specified levels of attainment and at post primary level accreditation;

- a document guided by pupil profiles/records/baseline entry level assessment/a pupil’s particular needs and strengths/a statement of SEN if applicable;

- a jargon free document which may be key stage and age consistent;

- a document a pupil can use to monitor his/her progress.

When should you expect to see an IEP?

- when a pupil’s learning is not ensured by current classroom strategies;

- when a pupil is on SEN register at stage 2/3/4/5 of the code of practice; and
when baseline assessment indicates the need for one.

Baseline assessment should indicate the learning styles of all pupils and more specially those pupils who learning types are different and require careful and additional consideration.

What are the management issues?

- All IEP targets should be achievable for both the pupil and the teacher;
- the IEP must be considered in the context of the overall class management of all pupils and staff;
- time allocated for delivery of the IEP should be integral to classroom and curriculum planning;
- regular periods of time for work with the pupil or for the pupil to work at targets should be recorded in the daily or weekly lesson plans;
- all staff coming into contact with the pupil should be aware of the IEP;
- the IEP should so far as possible provide access to the curriculum the pupil is following; and
- the IEP should arise from the school's overall inclusion practices and system of assessment and evaluation of learning progress.

Evaluating and Reviewing IEPs

- IEPs should be under continual review;
- the frequency with which the IEP is updated will depend on the pupils achievement academically and socially, how quickly
targets are achieved against the baseline assessment and progress toward the long term aims set;

- IEPs should be reviewed specifically to inform the annual review process or to evaluate the impact of the support/intervention provision;

- parents views should be sought (at least one review should coincide with annual parents night); and

- when possible pupils should be involved in target setting and review.
Finally ask where your school is in relation to:

UNESCO’s definition of inclusion from 2005 onwards

“Inclusion is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.

It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children.”

The IEP is an essential facilitator of this process.
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