

## TEACHER-PARENT COLLABORATION IN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM (IEP) FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

*Nora Mislan, Dr. Azlina Kosnin and Dr. Yeo Kee Jiar  
Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai*

### Abstract

*The aim of this study is to develop a collaboration model between teachers and parents in special education school in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. Teachers and parents are expected to work in partnership and collaborate to determine the goals and objectives that are appropriate to the students' development in various aspects. It is recognized that educational needs are difficult to be fulfilled unless individualized attention is given to these students. Thus, the IEP process should be taken seriously as it is one of the most crucial factors in the bid to improve on the services provided for students with disabilities. Writing and executing an effective IEP is critical since IEP provides the basis for quality education for these children. The sample in this study involved the parents whose children were being recognized as needing Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the teachers who were engaged in the implementation of the IEP process. Taking this matter into consideration, feedbacks from parents regarding their personal views as well as teachers' objectives and visions would be invaluable in developing effective special education programs.*

### 1.0 Introduction

Children in Malaysia with major disabilities are detected very early in their infancy when they are screened by health personnel. This is in line with the agreement made in the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons' (2002) target that by 2012, all children from birth to four years old receive community-based early intervention services including giving support and guidance to their families. Services for the special needs children in Malaysia are currently observed by three different ministries namely; the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development and the Ministry of Education. However, where education is concerned, according to the Department of Special Education (2003), only the Ministry of Education is involved in establishing school boards to ensure the provision of education for students' recovery programs and special needs such as the blind, deaf and those with learning difficulties. The categories of learning difficulties being catered by the ministry include children with Down syndrome, mild autism, attention deficit disorder, minimum retardation, and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexic.

Malaysia, being one of the state parties of The Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (2004), must also ensure that the potential of these children will be developed to their fullest potential. Taking into account of the vast individual differences students with disabilities, IEP should be prepared to cater to individual learning needs which is vital in preparing effective learning programs. According to Gartin and Murdick (2005), mentioned in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, 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 education that is administered for these students emphasizes on the physical,

emotional, spiritual and intellectual development in line with the country's National Education Philosophy.

There is an array of services that parents can choose for their children ranging from special schools and programs 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 children with disabilities must give attention to the education needs of these children in all regions of the country and in various economic conditions through both national and private schools. According to Person with Disabilities Bill (2007), the Ministry of Education must ensure that special education teachers are trained and qualified to teach in the special schools or the integrated inclusive schools for children with disabilities. As such, as stated in the Education Act 1996 (Act 550) & Selected Regulations (2004) of Malaysia, teachers who are trained in this field can plan appropriate instructional programs, adapt existing curriculum as well as evaluate student progress based on the developmental needs of the group. It is recognized that educational needs are difficult to be met unless individualized attention is given to these students.

### **1.1 Background of the problem**

Developing teacher-parent collaboration in IEP is an aspect to be taken seriously as a cornerstone of assuring more beneficial achievement effects among the students involved. It is a socialization process which takes various factors into account to help teachers and parents to adjust more quickly to their responsibility, reflect on their chosen roles and their behaviour within that professional collaboration to continue to improve the students' developmental outcomes. From the implementation of the Biwako Millennium Framework for Action (2002), it is being addressed that further attempt must be made in relation to family matters as they are found to be rather defective and need step up measures.

The key to success in individualization in the students' educational program is the Individualized Education Program (IEP) that will help both the teachers and parents to monitor the students' progress and developments. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975; the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1986, and the Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1997, have executed law concerning special education that recognizes family involvement and teacher-parent collaboration as an essential component in developing IEPs. The basis behind the IEP is the contract made between teachers and parents on services to be provided for the students based on their individual needs that have been agreed upon by both parties. This means that to determine the best way to facilitate learning, it is vital for teachers and parents to work as a team to discover where each student develops cognitively, socially and emotionally.

In Malaysia, there has been more concern in development of special education reflecting a high level of awareness and social responsibility. A number of schools and centres in various states were established to meet the different needs of students with disabilities. Teachers who are trained in this field plan appropriate instructional programs, adapting existing curriculum, evaluate students' progress based on the developmental needs of the students as well as getting parents collaboration. It is

recognized that educational needs are difficult to be fulfilled unless individualized attention is given to these students.

As increasing parents' involvement is essential in successful education programs, schools need to include parents as decision-makers and remain sensitive to the families' needs. With such discernment, school and teachers will be able to take a more responsive and proactive approach in building a better relationship with their parents. Teachers have to be tactful and portray confidence in their actions to naturally encourage parents to cooperate. By understanding the factors that influence and contribute to teacher-parent collaboration, barriers and impediments can be avoided. As Gerber (2000) had noted, much resistance to special education programs was due to lack of resources and understanding of the services and needs of students with disabilities.

The rationale for a collaborative approach between teachers and parents to decision making and service delivery lies in its efficiency and potential to produce high quality outcome. This study also intends to look into opportunities and ways in which parents are able to participate and become productive team members in working towards thriving IEPs. The effectiveness of the programs relies very much on the collaboration between teachers and parents which varies from one school to another. Although similar studies which examine the IEP process and teacher-parent collaboration are limited, Fleming and Monda-Amaya (2001) stated that evidence did suggest that an understanding of the team process could bring an impact to generating team effectiveness.

It is vital to identify the roles of teachers and parents in IEP in the context of special education in Malaysia, as perceived by them; their ideals and value systems, their beliefs and how they feel about the various factors affecting the function they play. The basis for teacher-parent collaboration relies highly upon beliefs in shared responsibilities for sound educational outcomes (Christenson, 2002). Teachers play a vital role as executors of the educational plans including giving support to parents and taking proactive actions through various resources available within and outside the classrooms. Parents, on the other hand, need to be encouraged to play their roles as facilitators of their children's developmental and school performance (Ames, 1993).

According to Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), persons with disabilities must be given the right to clarify and convey issues on their concerns that contributes to independent growth among the society. Parents are activist members who should combat for their civil rights and needs until these children seek independence. As much as educators accentuate on the needs for teacher parent partnerships, such relationships often fail to materialize (Epstein, 1995).

Apart from that, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) (2003), has also put an emphasis on developmental issues which include behavioral problems that may become a major influence in the students' academic achievement. The involvement of parents will not only strengthen this process but will further enhance the effectiveness of the program being rendered to the student. According to Lee-Tarver (2005), presently IEP plays a greater function than ever before in stipulating assistance not only to children with disabilities but also their families.

In creating successful IEPs, teachers and parents need to be able to work hand in hand as they constantly need support and feedbacks from each other on the students' development. However, the challenge in working as an effective team member in this scenario is even more demanding than having to work alone. Thomas, Correa and Morsink (1995) believed that this was due to various reasons such as team members expressing different views; speak varying "languages" and exhibiting a range of behaviours that had great impact in the collaboration and cooperation that was to be built.

As stated in the Biwako Millennium Framework for Action (2002), governments, NGOs, training institutions and other social partners must work together to provide and upgrade the teachers training to ensure that they are competent to teach in this field and meet the necessary requirements. Studies had found that existing teacher training had somehow neglected the importance of teacher-parent collaboration and to equip teachers with the necessary skills needed to build productive relationship (Reynolds & Clement, 2003).

Teachers' roles have become even more challenging as they have to cater not only to the needs of the students but also to meet up with parents expectations. Initial training that teachers go through not only prepares teachers in applying their skills in giving instructions and adapting curricula but also to join forces and become partners with the parents. Teacher-parent collaboration will make a vast contribution if both parties aim the same goal that is to improve students' achievement and excellence in education. In a study done by Harris (1998), it was indicated that IEP should intend to place the student with disabilities in the most appropriate program and the process acts as a mean to explain in an understandable manner to parents on their children's needs.

There are various factors that can impede the effectiveness of the IEP implementations which includes lack of role definition, standardization in partnership between team members and teachers' conduct. Parents with positive attitudes will cooperate with the school and promotes social integration. According to a study done in China by Yi Ding, Gerken, VanDyke and Fei Xiao (2006), it was found that the majority of the parents were concerned that teachers might not have sufficient relevant training and resources to implement the individualized instruction effectively. For collaboration to work successfully it is important for teachers and parents to put aside all preconceived ideas that they have on each others' role to focus and discuss the specific needs that the students need as functional individuals in the society.

Examining the function of IEP in meeting the mandated goals and objectives, it was found that the requirements were not clear, teachers lacked in skills in implementing programs or teachers were inadequate in representing students' actual experience and development (Hasazi, Furney, & DeStefano, 1999; Shearin, Roessler, & Schriener, 1999). IEP is seen as a process in which parents' and students' rights are materialized. It is therefore important for schools to find ways to improve on their education programs and gain parents cooperation in avenues such as in the implementation of the IEP to increase student success.

Shea and Bauer (2003) stressed that teachers could only develop appropriate activities in IEP after having a thorough understanding of parents' and their children's needs. The National Council on Disability (1996) also believes that it is important to enhance

the ability of families to collaborate not only with teachers in sharing decision-making authority to these students but also to the service system as a whole.

In dealing with policies such as in IEP, it is important that issues are guided by considering schools as a living systems and taking into account the understanding of individual, organizational, and community learning needs (McCombs, 2003). However, in a more recent study, Shriner and Destefano (2003) found that although students' IEPs should reflect on students' individualized needs but political and logistical factors influence the benefits of the IEP and hindered its actual application.

## **1.2 Research objectives**

The main objective of this research is to look into various aspects in which IEP process should be taken seriously as it is one of the most crucial factors in the bid to improve on the services provided for students with disabilities. The main objectives of this study are to identify:

- (i) Teachers' understanding on the implementation of IEP.
- (ii) Parents' understanding on the implementation of IEP.
- (iii) Teachers' perceived roles in implementing IEP.
- (iv) Parents' perceived roles in implementing IEP.
- (v) The difference between teachers' and parents' roles in special education.
- (vi) Teachers' expectations from parents in order to collaborate effectively.
- (vii) Parents' expectations from teachers in order to collaborate effectively.
- (viii) The components that promote effective collaboration perceive by teachers and parents in the IEP process.
- (ix) The teacher-parent collaboration model that meets the requirements to develop an effective IEP for the private school

## **1.3 Research questions**

This study was designed to answer the following research questions;

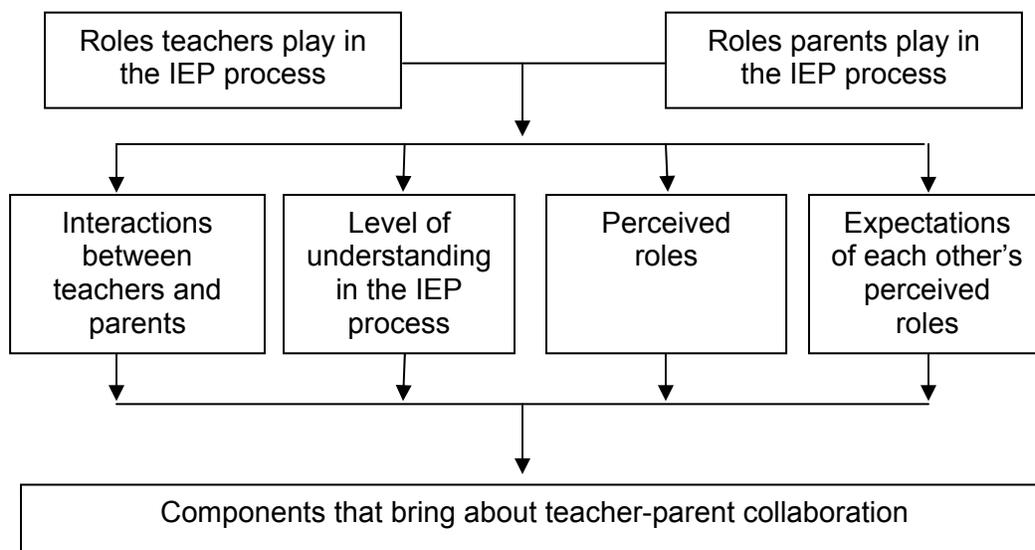
- Question 1: What do teachers understand on the implementation of IEP?
- Question 2: What do parents understand on the implementation of IEP?
- Question 3: What roles do teachers believe they play in implementing IEP?
- Question 4: What roles do parents believe they play with the implementation of IEP?
- Question 5: Is there any difference between the perception of teachers' and parents' roles in special education?
- Question 6: What do teachers expect from parents to collaborate effectively with the implementation of IEP?

- Question 7: What do parents expect from teachers to collaborate effectively with the implementation of IEP?
- Question 8: What are the components that promote effective collaboration perceived by teachers and parents in the IEP process?
- Question 9: What is the teacher-parent collaboration model that meets the requirements of an effective IEP for the private school?

#### 1.4 Conceptual framework

Considering the nature of teacher-parent collaboration, different schools may be looking at different factors contributing to the onset and the characteristics associated with effective IEP implementation. Though many strategies have been applied in the teacher-parent collaboration models, the formulation of any successful proposed strategy should rely upon the views of teachers and parents involved in the IEP process. The proposed strategies may include curriculum modification and acceleration, setting up of monitoring teams, modification of learning and teaching methods, coping and training skill for the teachers and home or school visits.

A proposed model can only be decided based on the findings of the data collected that is the questionnaires that will be given out to the teachers and parents. Interview questions can then be decided based on the quantitative analysis on the four independent variables which include teacher and parent understanding of the IEP process as well as its implementation, their interactions, their perceived roles and expectations of each other's roles. A checklist will then be designed to determine that the proposed strategies based on the findings after the interview sessions are being carried out and can be identified during the researcher's observation.



**Figure 1** Conceptual framework: Roles and effects of teacher-parent collaboration in IEP.

The research framework based on the discussion thus far concern aspects of the roles of teachers and parents in the IEP process. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed the examining human development requires consideration of the ecological system. The interrelationships between the components within the microsystem and between the mesosystem, that is, the collaboration between teachers and parents may have impact on the children's education development.

The focus of the present study is to examine the roles teachers and parents play in the IEP process. This is investigated in relation to the possible effects of teacher-parent collaboration on its effectiveness in the implementation of the IEP in meeting its aims. Figure 1 further explains the conceptual framework of this study.

## **1.5 Research design**

This research is going to be a descriptive and exploratory case study of teacher-parent collaboration. A qualitative research design utilizing an in-depth interview is used by the researcher as a core method to gather as much information required in understanding teachers' and parents' perceptions on how they are able to collaborate efficiently in IEP. According to Parker (2005), the task of interview in a fundamental research is to uncover meaningful pattern of thoughts in creating a research agenda. He adds that interview can be turned into a methodology in which some analysis is consciously done in the process of collecting the data itself.

A quantitative research design is also used but as a secondary method where questionnaires will be given out to teachers and parents at the initial stage of data collection. The quantitative data that is collected is exploratory in nature and is not meant to be exhaustive. It explores the roles teachers and parents play and the effectiveness in the IEP process that their teamwork brings about. The researcher chooses to use both the quantitative and qualitative to gather different methodological perspectives that can support each other in a research study and counteract the disadvantages of data collection in each single method (Flick, 2006).

## **2.0 Sample**

The sample in this study involves teachers and parents who are involved in IEP in the private school selected. Teachers and parents are the key informants and significant team members who are going to provide their perceptions and ideas in IEP in order to answer the research questions developed for this investigation. Samples selected based on purposeful sampling criteria

Out of the 21 teachers teaching in the school, only 17 are involved in the IEP process and implementation. Out of 90 students studying in the school, only 31 parents whose children are eligible for IEP services are involved in this study.

## **2.1 Research instruments**

In-depth interview sessions will be conducted with the teachers and parents involved to address the issues on:

- (i) willingness to understand and implement IEP
- (ii) willingness to interact with parents
- (iii) perceived roles
- (iv) expectations from each other

Questionnaires will be distributed and interview sessions will be carried out to gather as much information required for this study. Questionnaires are used to support the interview that is meant to create an in-depth understanding of the collaborative roles teachers and parents play in IEP. Questionnaire for teachers and parents are in line with the interview questions.

Five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agreeable, Moderately Agreeable, Slightly Agreeable, Moderately Disagreeable and Strongly Disagreeable is used in both set of questionnaires.

## **2.2 Data collection procedure**

Qualitative data will be analyzed using NVivo software to gather rich, editable text in order to finely focus on the research questions and thus developing a teacher-parent collaboration model in individualized education program (IEP) for the school involved.

The mean scores, frequencies, percentage and standard deviation will be used to analyze the teachers' and parents' questionnaires with regard to the independent variables referring to their willingness to understand and implement IEP, willingness to interact with each other, and expectations from one another as the data analysis technique for the questionnaires. T-test will be used to analyze whether there is any difference between the perception teachers and parents on their roles.

## **3.0 Conclusion**

As team members in the implementation of the IEP, teachers and parents must be able to cooperate as well as collaborate in creating the best education that can contribute productively in the children's total development. As the research for exploring teachers' and parents' functionality in special education program continue to grow, methods for developing ways to measure their roles are developed.

The Ministry of Education of Malaysia aims to improve the teaching profession by providing quality teacher training programs to keep up with global current changes in education. In order to find out teachers' concerns about their development, it is vital to find out about their perceptions and inclination. Based on the materials discussed earlier, special education teachers' attitudes are believed to affect the collaboration process significantly. Therefore, it is extremely important to identify the factors to increase teachers' keenness in building good rapport with parents in attracting their active participation in school program.

There are a lot of actions and plans to be taken to promote effective partnership between teachers and parents. However, the degree in which the strategies are related to the perceptions and interests of teachers and parents situations influences the success of IEP. Insights on the factors that contribute to factors that can positively engage teachers and parents in both supportive and collaborative roles should be

ironed up. For special education programs to be successfully implemented and cater to the diverse disabilities, more effort should be given to look into the possibilities in building constructive partnership between the two.

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