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Parents as stakeholders: Their expectations in individualized education plan for special education

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Abstract

The importance of equality among people cannot be over-stressed as it is already now which includes children with disabilities. Hence, the Individualised Education Plan (IEP) for special education was born. The objective of this research is to investigate parents' expectations towards the implementation. To gather data, semi-structured interviews are deployed to seven teachers and five parents while questionnaires are given to 17 teachers and 26 parents. The findings show that parents are satisfied with the services that teachers gave and showed in the IEP implementation. They also have high expectations towards the teachers and other issues such as the placement of specialists to provide more support and better understanding from the teachers. These results mean that misunderstanding could surface between both the teachers and parents. Therefore, collaboration between both parties should be worked out so that the IEP process could take place smoothly. Also, the schools should look into hiring specialist into the program as teachers would be able to learn from them.

Keywords: Parents, expectations, individualized education plan.

1.0 Introduction

Malaysia, being one of the State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Article 23), should ensure that various resources and appropriate assistance are provided to the children with disabilities as well as their families. The

Ministry involved should emphasize on social integration focusing on their education facets, medical care, and rehabilitation services as well as in preparing students with disabilities for employment. In this legislation, it is also stated that financial aid and free education should be given to these children if their families cannot afford to send them to school. Apart from that, it is highlighted in Article 29 that State Parties should also warrant that the education of the children is geared towards developing their character, aptitude, and physical abilities to the fullest.

In the mid 1990s, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia decided to integrate programmes for students with special needs into the national schools as part of a reform initiative. The Education Minister, Datuk Hishammudin Hussein mentioned in a local newspaper *New Straits Times* (2004), the needs for students with special needs would be catered for as he declared that education is every citizen's right and he is determined to ensure everyone is given a fair share of educational prospects. This is also in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which shows the Ministry's effort to educate the community and inculcate positive attitudes towards people with disabilities thus making social unity possible within the community itself. It is also vital to increase public awareness on the rights of children and youth with disabilities to education at all levels. As such, schools face greater challenges to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to education regardless of their physical or mental disabilities and meeting the demands of subdivision expectations (Jehl & Kirst, 1993; Hindlin, 2005).

As increasing parents' involvement is essential in successful education programmes, schools need to include parents as decision-makers and remain sensitive to the families' needs (Villa,

Thousand, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1990). Teachers have to be tactful and portray confidence in their actions to naturally encourage parents to cooperate (Smith, 1981). With such discernment, schools and teachers will be able to take more responsive and proactive approaches in building better relationships with parents.

The main objective of this research was to investigate on parents' hopes and expectations in their children's IEP implementation.

2.0 Literature review

Lytle and Bordin (2001) had appraised the challenges faced by the IEP members. They found that parents are actually feeling unduly treated, being foreign to the schools' policy and often not able to understand special education terminology or jargon used by the teachers. Such pitfalls have affected parents' feelings as they may feel left out and thus turn away from contributing ideas and collaborating with teachers. Payne (2001) stressed that when parents do not understand the words used during the meetings such as in IEP, success in collaborating may not be possible. Teachers on the other hand have perceived parental nonparticipation as lack of interest or appreciation. Doubts on each others roles, poor communication and bitterness in teacher-parent relationship have increasingly become barriers to successful collaboration (Fiedler, 2000; Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

In another study carried out by Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000), although 70% of the parents surveyed felt that they have the opportunity to contribute in their children's IEP, they are doubtful if their ideas are really being included in the actual IEP. Looking into teachers' perspectives on this issue in this study, they felt that it is their duty to complete

and prepare all the necessary documents to be presented to the parents. The teachers do not realize that they are dampening the collaborative dynamism that should occur between them in the IEP process. Margolis, Brennigan and Keating (1981) believed that it is important to make people involved in IEP to feel that they have made contributions and are appreciated in order to enhance their commitments thus making cooperation possible.

3.0 Methodology

A qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews are used by the researcher to gather as much information required to explore on parents' expectations in IEP implementation. Questionnaires were given out to a total of parents for the quantitative data collection. However, for the interview sessions only five parents were interviewed as data were saturated at this point. The quantitative data collected is descriptive in nature and is not meant to be exhaustive. It heightens the findings of the qualitative data thus offer greater insight into the case study (Patton, 2002). Simultaneous triangulation approach is used as both qualitative and quantitative methods are carried out almost at the same time thus limiting the researcher's opportunity in preparing the next method during data collection (Morse, 2008). However, it should be noted that both findings still act as complementary measures for each other at the end of the study.

4.0 Findings

Parents were asked questions in relation to their expectations from teachers in IEP implementation during the interview sessions. From the qualitative data, parents seemed to be rather contented with the service that teachers gave and showed in IEP implementation. They voice their satisfaction in the services rendered by the

teacher in their explanation as well as in carrying out IEP procedure as required.

Their excerpts are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Satisfied with services that teachers rendered in IEP

Identification	Interview excerpts
P1	Most of the teachers are skillful and know the needs of the students. They always keep me updated and inform me on my daughter's progress.
P2	Teachers explain in detail during meeting. Compare with me, they are the ones who work harder to bring my children forward. We have to be considerate.
P3	Looking at my children's progress, I am sure teachers follow the steps that should be taken.
P4	I am happy with the IEP services. Knowing my daughter's condition, I cannot expect her to show improvement quickly.
P5	I understand that teachers are doing their best to serve my son in his IEP. Teachers have limited time during school hours. They also have to give their attention to other students. Parents should play their roles. I cannot put high expectations. They are trying to help the students.

Parents felt that teachers had explained generally well on all matters involved in IEP that they were required to know. They acknowledged teachers' efforts in guiding and educating their children. They knew that they should not have high expectations on their children's development as they were aware that it was going to take a long time before progress is seen.

Parents believed that teachers had followed IEP procedure based on the outline given by the school. Most of the parents thought that teachers had carried out their duties effectively. This was based

on their experiences during IEP meetings and discussions that they had with teachers as well as from progress shown on their children.

However, two of the parents also expressed their hopes on how they felt the services could be improved. Their suggestions were in two aspects namely in getting specialist to guide the teachers at the school as well as for teachers to be more understanding towards their children. Table 4.28 portrays their excerpts.

Table 4.28: Suggestions on further improvement

Identification	Interview excerpts
P1	They can ask the more experienced teachers for ideas. I hope teachers can go for training and become specialized in this field. Hope the Ministry can send trained teachers to teach at the school.
P3	Teachers must be more understanding towards children's problems at home. Parents should inform.

Two sets of views were gathered from parents on what they hoped teachers could improve on further in carrying out their roles in IEP. Parents noticed that teachers generally improved on their skills in IEP learning from their own experiences or getting guidance from colleagues and principal. They felt that the school's IEP service could be improved with guidance from specialists in special education field. Much more could be attained given more training and supervision from higher authority.

Parents felt that teachers should be more understanding especially towards problems faced by families. Family problems surfaced in various forms and thus could affect parents' participation in their children's education which includes their involvement in their children's IEP. Teachers should find ways on how they could help while parents on the other hand must also be truthful to teachers by sharing their problems. Parents showed reasonable expectations from teachers in IEP implementation. They were generally satisfied with the services that teachers gave. Based on their children's progress, they believed that teachers had carried out IEP accordingly. However, they suggested that IEP implementation could be improved further. Firstly, parents expressed their hope to see more trained

and specialized people in this field in the school. Parents also hoped that teachers could be more understanding towards children's family problems that could affect parents' involvement in their children's education.

The findings of parents' expectations from teachers in IEP implementation based on the questionnaire are presented in Table 2. The overall mean score for this variable was 3.90, indicating high level of expectation from teachers on the implementation of IEP. The mean scores for related items were between 3.31 and 4.35. This range was in the moderate and high levels. Mean scores for item 18 (In preparing the curriculum in IEP, I believe the teacher use the guidelines set by the school in determining the short and long term objectives) and item 26 (I am satisfied with the cooperation given by the teachers in IEP process) were the same with the mean value of 4.35. Item 11a (If I cannot attend the IEP meeting, the teacher call and discuss with me over the phone) had the lowest mean with the mean of 3.31. Two items with the mean of 3.46 are item 5 (I am explained in detail by the teacher on the IEP process before the meeting) and item 19a (In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the teachers).

Table 2: Percentages, means, and standard deviations for items on parents' expectation on teachers to collaborate effectively in the implementation of IEP

No.	Item	SD %	MD %	SLA %	MA %	SA %	Mean	StD
5	I am explained in detail by the teacher on the IEP process before the meeting.	7.7	7.7	30.8	38.5	15.4	3.46	1.10
6	I am explained in detail by the teacher on the IEP process after the meeting.	11.5	-	23.1	50.0	15.4	3.58	1.14
9	I welcome teachers' cooperation and instill mutual understanding with them to enhance the IEP services being rendered.	7.7	-	3.8	30.8	57.7	4.31	1.12
11a	If I cannot attend the IEP meeting, the teachers call and discuss with me over the phone.	7.7	11.5	34.6	34.6	11.5	3.31	1.09
11b	If I cannot attend the IEP meeting, the teachers decide on the date to meet and discuss.	3.8	3.8	30.8	53.8	7.7	3.58	.86
13	I am given attachments which explain the contents and goals for the related meeting that is held.	-	-	19.2	57.7	23.1	4.04	.66
14	I allow the teacher to determine the objectives for my child's IEP.	-	3.8	15.4	46.2	34.6	4.12	.82
15	I allow the teacher to determine the short and long term objectives for my child's IEP.	-	-	11.5	53.8	34.6	4.23	.65
16	The teachers prepare all the documentation needed to be presented to me.	-	-	15.4	46.2	38.5	4.23	.71
18	In preparing the curriculum in IEP, I believe the teachers use the guidelines set by the school in determining the short and long term objectives for my child.	-	3.8	11.5	30.8	53.8	4.35	.85

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19a	In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the teacher.	3.8	7.7	42.3	30.8	15.4	3.46	.99
19b	In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the school.	-	11.5	34.6	26.9	26.9	3.69	1.01
25	*IEP is not required as the services provided by the special education teachers are sufficient in developing my child's potentials.	7.75	7.7	11.5	34.6	38.5	3.88	1.24
26	I am satisfied with the cooperation given by the teachers in the IEP process.	-	11.5	-	30.8	57.7	4.35	.98
	Total						54.6	
	Overall mean						33.90	

n= 26

4.1 Triangulation of Qualitative and Quantitative Output on Parents' Expectations

Parents' expectations were also identified from the questionnaire as well as through interviews. The themes from the interviews that were parallel in items on the questionnaire are as follows:

During the interview session, parents expressed that teachers had explained all the necessary information that they needed to know on their children's IEP. Parents appreciated teachers' efforts and thus would be more considerate in their expectations towards teachers. Item 5 (I am explained in detail by the teacher on the IEP process before the meeting) with the mean of 3.46 and item 6 (I am explained in detail by the teacher on the IEP process after the meeting) with the mean of 3.58 showed that teachers had made efforts to explain to parents before and after the meeting. Based on item 13 (I am given attachments which

explain the contents and goals for the related meeting that is held) with the mean of 4.04 and item 16 (The teachers prepare all the documentation needed to be presented to me) with the mean of 4.23 showed that teachers' explanation was supported by documents to be presented to parents. Item 9 (I welcome teachers' cooperation and will instill mutual understanding with them to enhance the IEP services being rendered) with the mean of 4.26 and item 26 (I am satisfied with the cooperation given by the teachers in the IEP process) with the mean of 4.35 showed that parents listened to teachers explanation on their children rather well and would cooperate whenever necessary. Item 25 (*IEP was not required as the services provided by the special education teachers were sufficient in developing their child's potentials) showed that parents wanted IEP to supplement their children's learning.

Parents expressed their reassurance that teachers had carried out IEP as given

by the school guidelines. They also reiterated that judging from their children's progress, teachers put in a great amount of effort in IEP for their children. Based on item 18 (In preparing the curriculum in IEP, I believe the teachers use the guidelines set by the school in determining the short and long term objectives for my child) with the mean of 4.35 emphasized on parents confidence on teachers' competencies. Items 14 (I allow the teacher to determine the objectives for my child's IEP) with the mean of 4.12 and item 15 (I allow the teacher to determine the short and long term objectives for my child's IEP) with the mean of 4.23 showed parents' confidence in letting teachers prepare their children's IEP learning objectives. Item 19a (In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the teacher) and 19b (In my opinion, yearly goals as well as short and long term objectives should be prepared by the school) further supported high regards of parents on teachers' and schools' capability in determining what was required in their children's IEP. Item 11a (If I cannot attend the IEP meeting, the teachers call and discuss with me over the phone) with the mean of 3.26 and item 11b (If I cannot attend the IEP meeting, the teachers decide on the date to meet and discuss) with the mean of 3.58 showed that teachers had met parents expectations by either calling to discuss over the phone or arranging for another meeting when parents could not attend the meetings.

Although parents seemed to be contented with the services given in the above aspects, they had voiced their expectations in other areas such as for the school to get specialist to provide more support to the school's services and for teachers to have a better understanding of their students' family situations. These factors were not included in the questionnaires directly. However, these

were critical views that should not be dismissed.

5.0 Discussion and conclusion

IEP could be carried out more effectively with the support of both parents and teacher. Therefore, both parties need to collaborate and work in partnership so that IEP process could take place smoothly. Parents should realize that they play a major and important role in IEP thus they have to provide their cooperation with teachers to determine their children's success in the programme.

Parents involved in this study were generally satisfied with the services that teachers had given in IEP implementation both in their explanation as well as in the procedure. This shows that parents understood the terms used by the principal as well as teachers during meetings concerning IEP. This findings are not in line with Lytle and Bordin's (2001) and Payne's (2001) findings when they found that parents usually felt intimidated with the terms used and that had them put off from getting involved.

Based on parents' observation, teachers followed IEP implementation procedure during meetings and discussions as well as based on their children's progress. This is not in line with Guernsey and Klare's (1993) findings which shows that teachers did not follow the procedure and not carrying out IEP based on the decision made together. Majority of the parents surveyed in Garriott, Wandry, and Snyders' study (2000) also found that parents were doubtful that teachers had carried out IEP activities as discussed and to include parents' ideas in the implementation. Yet, parents involved in this study had reciprocal understanding and were satisfied with the services that had been provided and did not expect more

from the school and teachers than what had been provided in these aspects.

It was hoped, the school could hire experts in this field to add further value to the provision. Rather than learning from experience, teachers could enhance their skills by getting advice and guidance from experts. This was an important point to be considered coming from parents' perspective. According to the Education Act 1996 (Act 550) & the Selected Regulations (2004) of Malaysia, teachers are allowed to plan their lessons for students with disabilities based on their own discretion. Although the teachers were trained, it would be better if they could turn to an expert available at all times at the school to seek recommendations and guidance rather than from each other not knowing whether the move taken was right.

Parents also thought that teachers could be more understanding towards the students' family problems. It was accentuated by Villa et al. (1990) that schools need to be sensitive to families' needs in order to entice them to participating in their children's education. When teachers showed a lack of understanding on students' family problems, parents would lose their optimism. Then again, parents need to be willing to share their difficulties with teachers so that they are aware of the happenings and could find avenues to assist parents. Conflicts often occur when two parties were not able to understand each other's problems and would make unjustified assumptions when things did not work out as expected (Gerber, 2000). When understanding and good relationships had been established, sharing of ideas and problems would be more possible, thus avoiding any disagreement (Salend, 2005).

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