

Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education

Volume 2
Number 5 *Electronic Journal for Inclusive
Education Vol. 2, No. 5 (Winter/Spring 2010)*

Article 2

Winter 2010

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Collett, E., & Harkins, M. (2010). Exploring Inclusive Education from the Perspective of Preservice Teachers, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 2 (5).

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Exploring Inclusive Education from the Perspective of Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

This study investigates the nature of preservice secondary teachers' perceptions of the Individual Program Plan (IPP) process enrolled in a two-year Bachelor of Education program in a university in Eastern Canada. Teachers' perceptions have been a vital feature in the successful implementation of the IPP process, and inclusion in general. Therefore, it will be crucial for educational leaders and stakeholders to have a clear understanding of preservice teachers' perceptions of the IPP process and the factors that affect those perceptions prior to entering the profession. Results suggested that secondary preservice teachers' tended to hold generally positive perceptions of the IPP process. A majority of preservice teachers responded positively to statements regarding the feasibility and relevance of the IPP process and held moderately positive views regarding accountability to the child on the IPP and to the process. Findings indicated however, that a majority of preservice teachers reported feeling unprepared to participate in the IPP process. Recommendations for preservice teacher education are suggested.

Exploring Inclusive Education from the Perspective of Preservice Teachers

Inclusive education is currently among the top debates in education today. Discussion of inclusive education has sparked intense and fervent reactions from parents, teachers, administrators,

researchers, students, and policy makers (Lerner, 2000). There are essentially two sides to the debate of inclusion: that which argues in support of the concept of full inclusion and that which argues for the concept of a continuum of alternative placements, with the least restrictive environment in mind (McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). This debate over inclusive education has been the impetus in considering the focus for this study.

In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms states that,

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, nationality or ethnic origin, color, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability (Department of Justice Canada, 1982, 15 (1)).

Further, in accordance with the Education Act of Nova Scotia (1996) teachers are required to “acknowledge and, to the extent reasonable, accommodate differences in learning styles” and to “participate in individual program planning and implement individual program plans, as required, for students with special needs” (Nova Scotia, 1996, 26 c & g). The Nova Scotia Department of Education’s Special Education Policy also states that, “Teachers are responsible for all students who are placed under their supervision and care. This includes responsibility for safety and well-being, as well as program planning, implementation, and evaluation” (Nova Scotia, 1996, p. 14).

The Nova Scotia Department of Education defines an inclusive school as “a school where every child is respected as part of the school community, and where each child is encouraged to learn and achieve as much as possible...a place where all children could learn and where differences are cherished for the richness they bring” (Nova Scotia, 1996, p. 13). Support services must be provided to students within the neighborhood school, grade level, and subject to the extent possible (Nova Scotia, 1996). The Department of Education also states that the question is no longer whether students with exceptional needs should be integrated but rather what support is needed to facilitate inclusive schools in providing education for all students (Nova Scotia, 1996).

The purpose of Individual Program Plans

Program plans for students with diverse needs are often referred to as Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in the literature, while within school boards in the province of Nova Scotia the plans are referred to as Individual Program Plans (IPPs). The term IPP was used in the questionnaire for this study and throughout the remainder of this paper the term IPP will be used for ease of reading unless IEP is in direct quotations. When the provincial curriculum outcomes are not applicable and/or attainable for an individual student an IPP is implemented based on the student's strengths and needs (Nova Scotia, 1996). Students work toward goals outlined in the IPP and this forms the foundation for the evaluation of student outcomes. Legislation clearly states the importance of the development, implementation, and review of Individual Program Plans (Department of Justice Canada, 1982, 15 (1), Nova Scotia, 1996, 26 c & g, Nova Scotia, 1996).

Individual Program Plans

Smith (1990) presents a broad review of the literature from 1975 to 1990 in the area of Individual Program Plans (IPPs). Smith discussed the literature by category: normative, analytical, and technological. In the early years when IPPs were first implemented, many researchers focused on topics such as legal issues or correct process. Normative research looked at the various aspects of IPPs in regards to legislation (Smith, 1990). Analytic research examined IPP perceptions by focusing on issues of correct implementation, compliance, quality and appropriateness. Technological research was evident during the mid 1980s. There was a surge of interest in computer programs and software for writing IPPs (Smith, 1990; Tymitz, 1981). This surge of interest seemed to be due to teachers' wishes to reduce time spent on writing IPPs.

Teacher perception of the IPP process is a critical area of study because it is noted throughout the literature as a key component to the successful implementation of inclusive policies. Kavale and Forness (2000) state that "attitudes and beliefs of educators has long been recognized [as] a major

factor in the success or failure of a policy such as mainstreaming” (p. 283). Secondary level educators became another component of focus in this study because it has been noted in the literature that “secondary schools have often carried the bulk of criticism” in regards to inclusive education (Foley, 1999, p. 56). Foley states that “secondary schooling has traditionally embraced an environment of subject coverage and mastery presented in a didactic manner by teachers to their students” (p. 56).

French (1998) was commissioned by the Nova Scotia Teachers Union to examine educators’ perceptions of the IPP process across school boards within the province of Nova Scotia. French (1998) concluded that educators indicated a positive perspective regarding inclusion of students with special needs, much like the 1985 study by Dudley-Marling which found that most of the 150 teachers surveyed indicated that an IPP does have some general usefulness for them and their students. It is interesting to note that the French found that Elementary teachers and resource teachers held exceptionally positive perceptions regarding the IPP process. Secondary teachers were found to hold some of these perceptions; however the participants indicated “concerns regarding appropriate placement and lack of programming expertise. Principals/vice principals noted the usefulness and worth of IPPs but found the IPP process demanding, especially the paperwork and added responsibilities” (French, 1998, p.2).

Dobrose conducted a study of Tennessee Middle School teachers’ perceptions of the IPP in 2000. In general, teachers still found the IPP paperwork to be excessive, but they did perceive that the IPP was an effective, useful document. The difference between special education and classroom teacher decreased and shows only a slight difference. Dobrose (2000) concluded that four main issues influence teacher perceptions of education directiveness and utility: accountability, feasibility, preparedness, and relevance.

In 2006, Tarver’s investigation into teachers’ perceptions of IPPs showed that a majority of teachers found IPPs useful in planning goals and objectives. As well, a majority of teachers reported they were involved in IPP development, and found that development of IPPs was a team effort however; they

noted that more professional development on IPPs was necessary for classroom teachers. Teachers also “felt that placement was the only team decision and, that time spent developing an IPP was not justified”. Tarver (2006) found that the gap between policy and practice was beginning to close as classroom teachers became more involved in the provision of services for all students, including those with disabilities.

Given the concerns of experienced teachers and limited research with pre-service teachers regarding lack of training, it is important to examine how pre-service teachers perceive the IPP process and their preparedness to engage in this process. When pre-service teachers’ and teachers’ perceptions are examined it is important to take this information into consideration when planning teacher preparation programs and developing policies and recommendations. This will ensure that policies and recommendations are coherent, consistent, and supportive and meet everyone’s needs and concerns (French, 1998). It is with this in mind, that the current study was designed to gain basic insights into the nature of pre-service, secondary education teachers’ perceptions of the IPP process. This descriptive study makes a contribution to the existing knowledge base and provides specific information about the preservice secondary teachers’ perceptions of IPPs. The information gleaned from this study provides future considerations and recommendations for the training of secondary Bachelor of Education students regarding IPPs.

Research Questions

Drawing on what Dobrose (2000) concluded were the four main influences (accountability, feasibility, preparedness, and relevance) of teacher perceptions of education directiveness and utility, the questions in this study are four-fold: (1) Do participants perceive that classroom teachers are accountable for students on IPPs? (2) Do participants perceive that they will have the necessary support and time to engage in the IPP process? (3) Do the participants’ perceive that they are prepared for

involvement in the IPP process? (4) Do participants perceive that engaging in the IPP process will be relevant to them as a teacher?

The Design of the Study

Participants

Participants in the study are pre-service teachers in a two-year Bachelor of Education secondary program at a university in Eastern Canada. There are 143 students in this program. There are two clusters included in the sample: first year secondary students and second year secondary students. In terms of a sampling procedure a census survey procedure was used because the entire sample was sufficiently small to include every member of the sample (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).

The secondary Bachelor of Education program available at this university requires two, half unit courses in the area of inclusive education in the first year of the program: 1. EDUC 5354 *Inclusive Classrooms for Learners with Exceptionalities in the Secondary School*. This course provides the student with a critical and pragmatic examination through case studies of programming, methods, techniques, strategies, materials, issues, and resources pertaining to the education of youth with exceptionalities in the regular secondary classroom. 2. EDUC 5353 *Development and Exceptionality*. This course provides a critical review of development across the lifespan with a focus on adolescence and youth with exceptionalities. Students examine and analyze various theories and research on aspects of normal and atypical growth dealing with cognitive, social and affective development, and implications for the teaching/learning process. In their second year, EDUC 5501 *Special Topics in Education: Psychological Perspective* is offered to students as an elective course. The course is designed to provide an opportunity for students to expand and update their knowledge in specific areas of interest and concern in the area of students with exceptionalities.

Of the 143 preservice teachers surveyed, 26 (18.2%) responded to the invitation to participate. It is difficult to conclude if all 143 preservice teachers were actually invited to participate because the

survey was distributed via email. There was a good chance that some students did not maintain current email accounts with the university.

Twenty-two (84.6%) of the 26 questionnaires were completed by females and 4 (15.4%) by males. Participants ranged in age from a minimum of 22 to a maximum of 45 with a Mean age of 27.12. Two participants (7.7%) chose not to share their age as this was an optional question. Fifteen (57.7%) of the 26 questionnaires were completed by first year students and eleven (42.3%) by second year students. Twenty-four (92.3%) preservice teachers indicated that they hoped to gain a teaching position as a classroom teacher. One (3.8%) participant indicated that she hoped to gain a teaching position as a Specialist teacher (specifically indicating French teacher). One (3.8%) participant indicated that she hoped to gain a teaching position as a Classroom teacher and/or Learning Centre teacher. Eight (30.8%) participants taught Junior High (grades 7, 8, 9), 10 participants (38.5%) taught Senior High (grades 10, 11, 12), and 8 (30.8%) participants taught both Junior and Senior High. Fifteen (57.7%) participants did not have an opportunity to develop or review an IPP during their practicum experience while eleven (42.3%) did have the opportunity to develop or review an IPP during the practicum.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire utilized in this study was derived from an existing questionnaire (French, 1998). This adapted questionnaire was written with the intention that it be easy to read, concise, and directions easy to follow. In terms of receiving the questionnaires back, directions were included with the letter of invitation about returning the questionnaires via e-mail to the researcher. The first part of the questionnaire included demographic information about the participants. The second part contained Likert-type scaled questions where teachers were asked to check boxes for the categories agree and disagree regarding statements provided. The final part of the questionnaire contained open-ended questions that asked teachers about their perceptions of the IPP process. The results were grouped according to the research questions.

Interpretation

The questionnaire both 4 – point Likert type scaled questions and open-ended questions. The Likert-type scale is easy to score, however the scale may be just as difficult to interpret as open-ended responses (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Likert scales also tend to box people in and force them to answer the questions with the responses that are available to them (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). French (1998) states that “research has shown that when forced to make a commitment other than a neutral one; most people can make reliable decisions” (p. 3). However, it is possible that some respondents will be neutral in their response; Dumas (cited by Page-Bucci, 2003) states 'that by eliminating a neutral level it is providing a better measure of the intensity of participants' attitudes or opinions. This, in the case of the current study, may help interpret results as the sample size is small.

Ethical issues

Confidentiality was a major consideration as the questionnaire was distributed by e-mail. Every step necessary was taken to ensure the participants did not feel compromised in terms of anonymity (i.e. not requiring a name or other such identifier on the survey). The consent form used in this study clearly ensured that the participant was able to give informed consent.

Data Analysis

The data were categorized into four independent variables: preservice teacher group (first year of study or second year of study); teachable subject areas (arts or science based subjects); grade level taught (junior high or senior high); and previous experience with IPPs (experience or no experience). Four dependent variables were considered (preparation, feasibility, relevance, and accountability) (Dobrose, 2000). The quantitative data were analyzed using the statistical analysis software program SPSS 14.0. The quantitative data were bolstered by the qualitative data.

The dependent variables were coded from the questionnaire for analysis. In most cases descriptive statistics consisted of frequencies, percentages, and means. A Fisher's Exact test

was then used to analyze the association between the independent variables and the dependent variables. The Fisher's Exact test was used to calculate p-values. An overall score for each variable: relevance, preparation, feasible, and accountable were computed by adding the response over the appropriate questions for each variable. The overall score was then described as mean \pm standard deviation. Non-parametric methods (Mann-Whitney test and Kruskal-Wallis test) were used to assess the differences in the mean score of each variable between the different levels of the independent variables because of the small sample size. An alpha level of .05 was used; any p-value smaller than or equal to alpha was declared as significant and further post hoc method of analysis would have been advisable to pinpoint any other areas of significance. Due to the small sample size however, this is not recommended.

Findings

The results are presented by the four main influences: preparedness, feasibility, relevance and accountability. Both quantitative and qualitative results were reviewed for each influence.

Preparedness

In regards to participant response to statements that reflect preparation, nine (34.6%) participants agreed that they feel prepared to participate in the IPP process. Only three (11.5%) participants agreed that the coursework they have completed has prepared them to engage in the IPP process as a participant. Conversely, 19 (86.4%) participants agreed that IPP meetings can be stressful. A majority, 19 (86.4%) participants agreed that professional development sessions are needed on planning and implementing IPPs. Similar numbers of participants agreed that they were familiar with the Special Education Policy Manual (12 participants, 46.2%) and the policies and regulations in the Nova Scotia Education Act 1995 – 1996 (*Bill 39*) (11 participants, 42.3%).

Table 1.

Percentage of participants Agreeing with the Following Statements regarding Preparation

Statements	Percentage Agree / Strongly Agree
2. I feel prepared to participate in the IPP process.	34.6%
8. I feel that the coursework I have completed has prepared me to engage in the IPP process as a participant.	11.5%
14. IPP meetings can be stressful.	86.4%
15. Professional development sessions are needed on planning and implementing IPPs.	96%
18. I am familiar with the Special Education Policy Manual.	46.2%
26. I am familiar with the policies and regulations in the Nova Scotia Education Act 1995 – 1996 (Bill 39) .	42.3%

During your practicum did you feel prepared to participate in the IPP process?

Preservice teachers provided comments that showed that the majority of participants felt they were not prepared to participate in the IPP process. The perspective of many preservice teachers was reflected in the following comment: “Not at all. My cooperating teacher mentioned that students were IPP, but never went into specifics about what each student needed. I never saw an IPP plan written down, and got the impression this would be an inconvenience for my co-operating teacher.” On the one hand, one participant mentioned that he/she did not feel prepared but during the practicum she “discovered that much of the implementation is common sense, adapting material is something I found to be creative and imaginative - I enjoy it.” On the other hand, another participant mentioned that she was looking forward to learning about the IPP process but was disappointed she missed out on the opportunity to develop course adaptations for students who were on IPPs. Some participants acknowledged that while they may not have felt prepared entering the practicum, they did feel that they came away from the practicum with enough experience to engage in the IPP process.

Feasibility

Generally, participants responded positively to statements regarding the feasibility of the IPP process. Twenty-three participants (92%) agreed that IPP meetings are time consuming but relevant. While only eight participants (30.8%) agreed that the support personnel, resources, and funding needed to implement the IPP are available. All participants (100%) agreed that workload demands are already great without IPPs but that student gains are worth the time and effort involved in developing an IPP. As noted previously, 19 participants (86.4%) agreed that IPP meetings can be stressful. While 20 (76.9%) participants agreed that the time and effort involved in the IPP process affect the emotional and intellectual energy teachers have available for other students in their class.

Table 2.

Percentage of participants Agreeing with the Following Statements regarding Feasibility

Statements	Percentage Agree / Strongly Agree
4. IPP meetings are time consuming but relevant.	92%
6. The support personnel, resources, and funding needed to implement the IPP are available.	30.8%
7. Workload demands are already great without IPPs.	100%
13. Student gains are worth the time and effort involved in developing an IPP.	100%
14. IPP meetings can be stressful.	86.4%
16. The time and effort involved in the IPP process affect the emotional and intellectual energy teachers have available for other students in their class.	76.9%

Did you feel that you and your fellow teachers had the necessary support to engage in the IPP process?

The comments participants provided regarding the feasibility of the IPP process were varied. While some participants reported perceptions on the negative end of the spectrum with comments such as, "Not by a long shot", another participant commented: "My experience is limited to two very well staffed high schools that have many resources and handle the IPP process very successfully". Other

participants commented that feasibility was dependent on the particular situation. For example one participant reported that, “Most of the time for the co-operative students yes, but for the more difficult students sometimes yes, sometimes no”. Another preservice teacher stated, “It was nice that my cooperating teacher was relieved of her normal teaching responsibilities for a few days to develop the IPPs, but I think that there could have been more people giving input into the process than simply the classroom and resource teachers”.

Relevance

Overall, participant response to the statements regarding the relevance of the IPP process was positive. Twenty-six (100%) participants agreed that Individual Program Plans (IPPs) are needed for some students. Most participants, 23 (92%), acknowledged that while IPPs are time consuming they are relevant. Ten (41.7%) participants agreed to the statement that too many IPPs are developed. A majority of participants, 25 (96.2%), agreed with the statement ‘I feel it is important to engage in the IPP process as the teacher of a student who is on an IPP’. Similar results are shown for the conversely worded statement, ‘since I may only teach a single subject to a child who is on an IPP it will be impossible for me to be involved in the IPP process of every student that I teach who has an IPP’, only 6 (24%) participants agreed with this statement. As was reported for the other main influences, 19 (86.4%) participants agree with the statement, ‘IPP meetings can be stressful’.

Table 3.

Percentage of participants Agreeing with the Following Statements regarding Relevance

Statements	Percentage Agree / Strongly Agree
1. Individual Program Plans (IPP) are needed for some students.	100%
3. Too many IPPs are developed.	41.7%
4. IPP meetings are time consuming but relevant.	92%
9. Since I may only teach a single subject to a child who is on an IPP it will be impossible for me to be involved in the IPP process of every student that I teach who has an IPP.	24%

14. IPP meetings can be stressful.	86.4%
19. I feel it is important to engage in the IPP process as the teacher of a student who is on an IPP.	96.2%

Did you feel that engaging in the IPP process was relevant to you as a teacher?

Many preservice teachers commented that they felt the IPP process was not relevant to them as a preservice teacher but would be in the future. For example, one participant commented, “I don't feel as though I was able to engage in the process. I do think that this could be meaningful in the future”. One participant responded in a very positive manner to this question regarding relevance: “Absolutely, we have to dispense with the notion that every student walking into a classroom is going to have the same capabilities, or the same requirements. A one-lesson plan-fits-all idea is ridiculous.” Another participant noted that the IPP process was relevant to them as a teacher because it supported ‘flexible goal setting’ which in turn aided the teacher by quelling frustration levels with the academic process. Two other participants reported negative experiences in regards to the IPP process being relevant to them as teachers. In both cases this experience seems to be due to the participants’ particular experience in the practicum placement. Specifically they state, “Yes. It becomes political when your co-operating teacher hinders your participation in the IPP's of your students. You want to find out how to help, but you also don't want to ruffle their feathers. If a co-operating teacher isn't engaged, how can a student teacher be?” and “No, I felt that IPPs were inadequately integrated with the themes of the courses.” One participant presumed that she had not engaged in the IPP process because she had only implemented an IPP during her practicum. The participant commented: “I did not engage in the IPP process, simply implemented the IPP during my practicum”.

Accountability

Participant response to the statements regarding accountability to the IPP process was mostly positive; however, there was some variability. Twenty-six (100%) participants agreed that teachers

should be actively involved in the IPP process. A majority of participants, 23 (88.5%), agree that accountability for implementing an IPP can cause extra stress. Similarly, 19 (86.4%) participants agree that IPP meetings can be stressful. The following statements drew a moderate level of agreement from participants: 'IPPs should be developed by specialist and resource teachers'; and 'I feel legally mandated to provide or have available everything stated on the IPP' with 64% and 69.6% of participants agreeing respectively.

Table 4.

Percentage of participants Agreeing with the Following Statements regarding Accountability

Statements	Percentage Agree / Strongly Agree
5. Teachers should be actively involved in the IPP process.	100%
10. IPPs should be developed by specialist and resource teachers.	64%
11. Accountability for implementing an IPP can cause extra stress.	88.5%
14. IPP meetings can be stressful.	86.4%
17. I feel legally mandated to provide or have available everything stated on the IPP.	69.6%

Did you feel accountable to the child on the IPP and to the IPP process?

The majority of comments provided by preservice teachers indicated that they felt 'somewhat' accountable but really felt it was the cooperating teacher that was accountable. Some of the comments that reflect this opinion include the following: "Yes, although not formally, as the resource system overall seemed overloaded to the point where implementation tracking would have been prohibitively time consuming", and "Somewhat, I knew the cooperating teacher and the resource teacher would be looking at my work, which they did and completely changed". Another participant who included a comment in response to this question appears to not consider the actual question, but seems to provide

valuable feedback in regards to the IPP process in general. The participant commented, “I was not satisfied with the level of inclusion of all IPP students—even while I recognized that significant learning took place”.

Quantitative and Qualitative Responses to Questions 1 to 9 Regarding IPP Process

Questions 1 to 9 contain a mixture of quantitative and qualitative type responses. The following is a review of the data gleaned from these questions. Sixteen (61.5%) of 25 participants reported that they participated in course work or professional development session on IPPs. Only five (19.2%) of 26 participants reported being involved in the development of an IPP. Of the participants who reported developing an IPP, 66.7% felt that the IPP was warranted. Participants were asked, “Who makes the final decision regarding the need for an IPP?” One (5.9%) participant answered that ‘resource staff, parents, and administration’ would make the final decision regarding the need for an IPP. Seven (41.2%) participants reported that they felt the ‘resource teacher’ would make the final decision regarding the need for an IPP. Two (11.8%) participants reported that they felt ‘administration’ would make the final decision regarding the need for an IPP. While five (29.4%) participants reported that they ‘didn’t know’ who made the final decision regarding the need for an IPP. Nine (34.6%) participants did not respond to this question. Generally, secondary preservice teachers were unsure of who would make the final decision regarding the need for an IPP. A participant commented “It seems as though (at the school I was at anyway) that everyone is trying to pass on the workload, and no one is completely sure who is truly responsible for the development of the IPP.”

Twelve (92.3%) of the 13 participants who has been involved in developing or reviewing and updating an IPP felt process was meaningful however, their general comments varied. For example, one participant responded that “It is important to develop a meaningful IPP specifically designed for individual students. This work is extremely meaningful.” Yet, another participant responded that, “It was a good experience for ME, but I think, not meaningful for the student”. Other participants continued to

echo the response of not feeling prepared: "I know the basic idea of an IPP, but we have not received any instruction on how to make one or what to consider when making an IPP".

Preservice secondary teachers commented on the time involved in developing an IPP. Some participants answered that time spent was not enough, "When I participated, it was mostly in an observational sense, and I don't think it was done well at all; it was rushed, taking only about 15-20 minutes for each student." While another participant commented, "Though the process can be time-consuming, it is imperative to remember that the education of the child comes first in the classroom. If a child's educational experience can be improved through time commitment of teachers and educational professionals, all the time is worthwhile and beneficial". Participants were further asked if they were comfortable with their level of participation in the IPP process, eight (88.9%) of nine participants who responded answered yes they were comfortable.

Questions 4 to 6 were open-ended questions that asked preservice secondary teachers to comment on the role of various participants in the IPP process. A majority of preservice secondary teachers responded to the question "What was the principal's / vice-principal's role in the IPP process?" by indicating that they were either unsure of the administrator's role in the IPP process or that the administrator was not involved. There were some participants who responded in a positive way, stating, "He attended the meetings and was knowledgeable about all the students and their specific alterations"; and "...The vice principal was in attendance at meetings and added/subtracted information from the IPP draft as it was discussed between guidance, parents, and teachers". Preservice secondary teachers were asked "What was the role of your cooperating teacher in the IPP process?" In general, participants responded in a positive way to this question and most were aware of her cooperating teacher's role in the IPP process. For example, one participant shared the following comment: "My cooperating teacher was responsible for meeting with the resource teachers to discuss how well the students were functioning in her particular class... Once they established as a group which students

should be on IPPs, my cooperating teacher was responsible for developing the actual IPP and implementing it". Another participant commented that she felt that the cooperating teacher did "As little as possible. She would quickly write something, usually very similar to the last one, then she would implement it in her own way".

A majority of participants responded to the role of the parent/guardian in a positive way. The comments included were "As far as I know, the parents were not attending the IPP meetings"; and "The two IPP's that I was involved in, the parents did not show up to the meetings". However, no participants stated that students were involved or had an active role in the IPP process.

Thirteen (86.7%) of the 15 participants who responded to the question other professionals involvement in the IPP process, reported that other professionals were involved. Other professionals that were involved included resource teachers, itinerant teachers, classroom teachers, a social worker, Learning Centre teachers or Special Education teachers, APSEA (Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority) itinerant teachers, Guidance Counsellors, and a School Psychologist. One (3.8%) participant indicated that they 'did not know'; three (11.5%) participants did not respond; and nine (34.6%) participants indicated that they felt that the question was 'not applicable'.

Participants were asked if material and personnel supports were available to implement the IPP. This aspect of IPP process has been indicated in much of the research as a barrier to inclusion (Dobrose, 2000; French, 1998; Morgan & Rhode, 1983; Morrisey & Safer, 1977; Rheams, 1989; Rinaldi, 1976; Smith, 1990). Eight (50%) participants out of 16 who responded to the question agreed that material supports were available and 11 (68.8%) participants agreed that personnel supports were available to implement the IPP.

Group Comparisons

A number of group comparisons were analyzed for statistical significance using the Fisher's Exact test, as the data was non-parametric and the sample size was small (N=26). The first comparison

was based on preservice teachers' year of study compared to factors of: preparedness, feasibility, relevance, accountability, and general perceptions. This comparison was done to examine if there was a difference between how preservice teachers responded, depending on whether or not they have completed their first or second year of study. The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted and the results were significant $\chi^2 (2, N=26) = .045, p < .05$ for the preparedness variable only. For preservice teachers who were in their second year of study they were more likely to agree with statements regarding preparation.

The next comparison was made between participants with experience developing and/or reviewing IPPs during their practicum and with participants with no experience developing and/or reviewing IPPs during their practicum. This comparison was done to examine if there was a difference between how preservice teachers responded depending on whether or not they have experience with IPPs. Mann-Whitney U test was conducted and the results were significant $\chi^2 (2, N=26) = .045, p < .05$ for the preparedness variable only. Preservice teachers who had experience developing and/or reviewing IPPs during their practicum were more likely to respond positively with statements regarding preparation.

The next comparison was made between participants who taught different grade levels (Junior High; Senior High; and both levels) during their practicum. This comparison was done to examine if there was a difference between how preservice teachers responded depending on whether or not they taught in Junior High, Senior High, or both. A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted and the results were not significant for any of the factors.

The next comparison was made between participants who taught different subjects during their practicum. This comparison was done to examine if there was a difference between how preservice teachers responded depending on whether or not they taught Arts oriented subjects or Science oriented

subjects. A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted and the results were not statistically significant for any of the factors.

Comments regarding Coursework or Practicum

Finally, when asked, “do you have anything to add regarding your coursework or practicum as it relates your perceptions of the IPP process?”, the vast majority of preservice teachers commented that they felt there was not enough time during coursework spent on the IPP process. Some participants mentioned the practicum as a valuable learning opportunity regarding the IPP process. Other participants commented that while they did receive some information on IPPs and the IPP process they did not feel any information regarding how to modify curriculum was imparted. Some participants suggested that further course work in the area of inclusive education be required of the program or perhaps ‘mandatory sessions’ on the topic. Generally, preservice teachers felt that they were unprepared to engage in the IPP process when they enter the field of education. Included below are comments from the participants as it was important for the participants’ voices to be heard.

I have not encountered any material in my courses that have increased my knowledge of what an IPP is nor how to make and implement one. I had no experience in my practicum either and therefore was unable to answer many of these questions. I feel that I have had to look up information regarding IPP's myself and would love to be able to gain further information from my courses next year and during my practicum.

I feel that I didn't gain much information of the specifics of an IPP (or on what to expect from IPP meetings) from our course work, though we did receive a lot of vague or general information. I feel that some mock IPP meetings within a university setting might be helpful in better understanding the process and our role as teachers (and as STUDENT teachers).

Although we did cover briefly how an IPP is developed and what one looks like, I felt completely unprepared to modify a lesson to meet the different learning needs of my IPP students. Discussion at length of methods of lesson modification during my coursework would have helped me feel more prepared. I had to turn to a friend who teaches elementary school to assist me in figuring out what to do.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of preservice secondary teachers' perceptions of the Individual Program Plan (IPP) process. There has been considerable research in the area of inclusion and to a lesser extent in the area of teachers' perceptions of the IPP process.

A majority of preservice teachers responded positively to statements regarding the feasibility of the IPP process. Preservice teachers agreed that while implementing an IPP can be time consuming, it is a worthwhile task for the benefit of the student. It was found that a majority of preservice teachers reported feeling unprepared to participate in the IPP process. In regards to accountability to the IPP process, preservice teachers' responses were mostly positive; however, there was some variability in participant response. A moderate number of preservice teachers felt that 'IPPs should be developed by specialist and resource teachers'. There was a significant difference between how preservice teachers responded to statements regarding preparation depending on whether or not they have completed their first or second year of study. There was also a significant difference between how preservice teachers responded to statements regarding preparation depending on whether or not they have IPP experience.

Teachers' perceptions have been a vital feature in the successful implementation of the IPP process, and inclusion in general. Therefore, it will be crucial for educational leaders and stakeholders to have a clear understanding of teachers' perceptions of IPPs and the factors that affect those perceptions. Overall, the preservice teachers surveyed in the current study held positive perceptions of the IPP process. There were, however, a number of concerns indicated within the results of the study.

Similar to the current findings, French (1998) concluded that educators indicated a positive perspective regarding inclusion of students with special needs however; teachers had "concerns regarding appropriate placement and lack of programming expertise. Principals/vice principals noted

the usefulness and worth of IPPs but found the IPP process demanding, especially the paperwork and added responsibilities” (French, 1998, p.2).

A majority of secondary preservice teachers responded positively to statements regarding the feasibility of the IPP process. In a study by Morgan and Rhode (1983) it was found that teachers perceived that excessive time demands and insufficient support from school personnel made engaging in the IPP process difficult. The current study found that secondary preservice teachers agreed that while implementing an IPP can be time consuming, it is a worthwhile task for the benefit of the student.

It was found that a majority of preservice teachers reported feeling unprepared to participate in the IPP process. This is supported by Tarver’s (2006) report that teachers felt that more professional development on the IPP and the IPP process is necessary to enable teachers to successfully embrace and use inclusion practices. Smith (2000) also found that secondary teachers’ perceptions did not feel prepared to teach students who are on IPPs. Specifically, it will be helpful for preservice teachers to receive training of different strategies to use with all different types of special needs students.

In regards to accountability to the IPP process, a moderate number of preservice teachers felt that the IPPs should be developed by specialist and resource teachers but that they feel legally mandated to implement all aspects of the IPPs. In contrast to this finding, Dudley-Marling (1985) found that teachers would write some form of an IPP even if it was not required by law. There was a significant difference between how preservice teachers responded to statements regarding preparation depending on whether or not they have completed their first or second year of study. There was also a significant difference between how preservice teachers responded to statements regarding preparation depending on whether or not they have IPP experience.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The findings of the current study highlight the importance of preparing teachers to ensure they are aware of policies, sound practices, and have started to formulate a philosophy regarding inclusive

education. Inclusion can present as a complex issue with no easy solutions and so it is only through research and thoughtful reflection on research and on practice that strides can be made toward the pathway of successful inclusive education. In light of these findings, the following recommendations for preservice secondary teacher training programs should be considered: (1) an examination of the existing coursework regarding inclusive education and teacher participation in the IPP process should be conducted; (2) professional development sessions may be an option to incorporate further information to preservice teachers outside of teacher training coursework; (3) preservice secondary teachers need to be provided with specific information regarding the School Program Planning Team process and the criteria with which a team may arrive at the decision to develop an IPP for a student; (4) the roles and responsibilities of participants in the IPP process need to be clarified; and (5) preservice secondary teachers need to become more familiar with the policies and regulations related to inclusive education

This study has indicated that preservice teachers would benefit from additional formal education and coursework in educating exceptional students. Rademacher and others (1998) (cited by Jobling & Moni, 2004) found that new teachers are likely to develop negative perceptions if ill prepared for teaching students with exceptionalities. Perceptions, once formed, may be difficult to change even after positive experiences (Rademacher et. al., 1998 cited by Jobling & Moni, 2004). Preservice teacher preparation in the area of teaching students with exceptionalities is critical. Preservice teachers must be prepared to teach children with exceptionalities when they leave the university to begin their teaching career. Consequently, the needs of the individual student must not be forgotten in rush to meet the various other demands of teaching.

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