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## Teachers' Attitudes Towards Using Individual Education Plans in the Regular Classroom for Students With Specific Learning Difficulties

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**TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS USING INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION  
PLANS IN THE REGULAR CLASSROOM FOR STUDENTS WITH  
SPECIFIC LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

**BY**

**Nicola Davis B.A.**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of**

**Bachelor of Education with Honours**

**at the Faculty of Education,**

**Edith Cowan University**

**Date of submission: June, 1997.**

## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## ABSTRACT

Western Australia schools are now encouraged to provide education for an increasingly wider diversity of students and referral to special classes is less common place than it was in the past (EDWA, 1993). As a consequence the responsibility for teaching these students with disabilities, who were once eligible for education support has been given to the regular classroom teacher. This study focused on teachers' attitudes towards using Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties in regular Western Australian primary classrooms.

A sample of 300 regular metropolitan classroom teachers was randomly selected from regular primary schools and Priority School Program schools within the Perth metropolitan area. Survey variables were teachers' ages, special education provisions at their school, year group taught, amount of practical teaching experience, qualifications, confidence as a result of teacher training and their previous success with students experiencing difficulty with learning. A mailed questionnaire produced a response rate of 48% (145 responses), marginally below the minimal 50 percent return rate expected for mail surveys (Deschamp & Tagnolini, 1988).

The study identified a number of anxieties and apprehensions that mainstream Western Australia primary school teachers have in regard to Individual Education Plans and students experiencing difficulties with learning. It also emphasised teachers' perceptions of the availability and adequacy of classroom support and resources for teachers of students experiencing difficulties with learning in mainstream Western Australia primary schools.

## Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education.

Further, to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Date.....*July 1997*.....

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### Background

In Western Australia it is now common practice for many students who experience difficulties with learning such as intellectual disabilities, or physical handicaps, to receive their education in regular schools (Doenu, 1984). This represents a transition from earlier educational practice (Education Department of Western Australia [EDWA], 1994). Early this century little recognition or support for students with special needs was offered in mainstream schools because the prevailing attitude of the time was "out of sight, out of mind" (Casey, 1984, p. 2). During this period, many students who would now receive formal education in a mainstream classroom were either institutionalised or kept at home, and thus denied an education. "The lives of tens of thousands of handicapped children were totally circumscribed through the belief that they neither could nor should be taught" (Center, 1987, p. 11).

From the 1920s to the 1960s the needs of students with disabilities were given more recognition. Instead of being ignored, an effort was made to provide these students with a basic level of education, however, this education was provided in segregated settings (Doenu, 1984). Students with disabilities were segregated according to their disabilities and taught exclusively with others who possessed similar disabilities (Casey, 1984). Segregated facilities for students with disabilities steadily increased and by the mid 1970s a strong network of special schools and special classes was well established (Doenu, 1984). Many special schools were located a long distance from the homes of these students, putting undue pressure on the parents.

In the 1960s a push for normalisation emerged, in contrast to the previous segregated system for dealing with students with disabilities (Bowd, 1990). Normalisation meant that instead of segregating students with disabilities, they would be taught, as far as possible, in more normal settings amongst their mainstream peers, at regular local schools.

Normalisation stressed "the use of culturally valued means to establish and/or maintain, as much as possible, experiences, characteristic personal behaviour, roles and social images that are culturally normative or valued" (Marozas & May, 1988, p. 135).

In practical terms, this means making the housing, education, working and leisure opportunities and conditions as normal as possible. It was based on the theory of normalisation that mainstreaming began.

By the end of the 1970s most states in Australia had policies for educating students with sensory, physical and intellectual disabilities in regular schools. However, in Western Australia it was not until 1992 that a social justice policy was published for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are "students with intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, vision or hearing impairments and autism, who are eligible for Education Support services under the Education Department of Western Australia Policy and Guidelines for the Education of Students with Disabilities" (EDWA, 1992, p. 1 ).

As a result of a change in policy, regular Western Australia schools are now encouraged to provide education for an increasingly wider diversity of students and referral to special classes is less common place than it was in the past (EDWA, 1993). As a consequence the responsibility for teaching these students with disabilities, who were once eligible for education support has been given to the regular classroom teacher. The current Education Support Social Justice policy for students with disabilities (EDWA, 1992) reinforces this development. It states that only those students who fit a particular set of criteria can be classified as eligible for education support. The criteria require the student to exhibit deficiencies in adaptive behaviour, academic achievement and intellectual functioning and an IQ of less than 70. These students should be provided with an education in a setting that can be located outside of the regular classroom.

One group of students who continue to pose a particular challenge for regular classroom teachers is those whose performance in literacy or numeracy is consistently below that of their peers.

This group of students, often referred to as students experiencing difficulties with learning or students with specific learning difficulties, was targeted by the Western Australia State Government Task Force Report on the Education of students with Disabilities and Specific Learning Difficulties in 1993 (Shean Report, 1993). Students experiencing learning difficulties "include those students who are experiencing difficulties with learning in literacy and numeracy and those students who appear to have long-term specific learning difficulties such as attention deficit disorder (ADD), dyslexia, etc," (EDWA, 1992, p. 1). These students are not included in the disabled category, and as such their needs are not provided for through the social justice policy for students with disabilities (EDWA, 1992).

In 1993, the Western Australia State Government Task Force discussed various issues regarding students experiencing difficulties with learning. These issues included, early identification, intervention, parental involvement and the development of Individual Education Plans. The task force published a document (known as the Shean Report) containing sixty one recommendations. These recommendations have important implications for the education of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom. The recommendations concern early identification, early intervention, reporting to parents, pre-service and in-service education and program development.

Currently in Western Australia, a learning difficulties program team is focusing on professional development for regular classroom teachers to help them identify students experiencing learning difficulties in regular classrooms and develop Individual Education Plans (EDWA, 1994). The learning difficulties program was initially established as a response to parental concerns regarding ADD. It was later employed by the Education Department of Western Australia, to focus on the needs of students with specific learning difficulties, including ADD, in the regular classroom. The Education Department of Western Australia employed this team to design a professional development program regarding the design and implementation of Individual Education Plans, in accordance with recommendation 16 of the Shean Report (EDWA, 1993).

Individual Education Plans aim to provide students experiencing difficulties with learning with an education commensurate with their specific needs and abilities (Marozas & May, 1988). This may be achieved through assessing students, identifying their individual educational needs and planning learning programs accordingly. It is intended that regular classroom teachers will develop and implement these plans. Teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding Individual Education Plans will be important to their successful implementation, in the regular classroom.

In 1994 the Education Department of Western Australia published a document, responding to Shean Report recommendations. A number of the issues that were addressed in the Shean Report (1993) had already been considered and/or provided for by the government prior to the Shean Report. The government recognised this in their response document to the Shean Report recommendations and stated that, "Schools already meeting these standards will be encouraged to continue,...other schools will be provided with the necessary support to enable them to adopt these practices" (EDWA, 1994, p. 1). Other recommendations called for improvements to current practice and "an implementation plan (was) designed to enable these recommendations to be implemented as soon as possible" (EDWA, 1994, p. 1). Recommendations which have important resourcing, industrial or other implications, will be addressed as a priority "through the Education Department's medium and long-term strategic and financial planning" (EDWA, 1994, p. 1).

As a result of the responses from the Education Department of Western Australia, funds have been allocated by the Government and key recommendations noted as a focus in the triennium Strategic Plan for 1996 to 1998 (EDWA, 1995). The Government will allocate \$6.070 million dollars over a three year period for the implementation of the Task Force recommendations (EDWA, 1994). The Education Department's 1996 to 1998 Strategic Plan outlines the key strategic improvement areas to be developed over the next three years. The Strategic Plan 1996 to 1998 aims "to improve the support provided to schools and particular aspects of the operations of schools" (EDWA, 1995, p. 5).



A particular aspect of the Strategic Plan is the encouragement of schools and teachers to develop Individual Education Plans. The importance of the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans in regular classrooms is outlined in the Strategic Plan, and will be in place in Western Australian schools by the end of 1998 (EDWA, 1995).

### Problem

Most of the research into teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans comes from the United States. Limited research into teachers' attitudes towards individual education plans has been carried out in Western Australia. As a result, models for the design and implementation of Individual Education Plans from the United States may form the basis for many attitudes and perceptions developed by teachers in Western Australia, attitudes that may influence the implementation of Individual Education Plans in Western Australia, in the regular classroom. However, United States findings are not wholly relevant to the Australian system, due to the differences between the United States and Western Australian education systems. These have been considered in this study and are explained in the literature review.

Due to the inherent differences between the American and Australian education systems, the attitudes of teachers toward the implementation of Individual Education Plans in the United States make it difficult to generalise to the Australian system. The Education Acts of each country differ from one another, particularly regarding the rights of students to free and appropriate education. Individual Education Plans have become an important issue in Western Australia as they are expected to be in place in regular classrooms by 1998 (EDWA, 1995). Research into the attitudes and perceptions of Western Australian primary school staff and teachers is likely to be of value as it may assist in the effective implementation of individual plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning, in the regular classroom. Effective implementation of Individual Education Plans may be dependent on the attitudes of teachers towards students with specific learning difficulties and their perceptions of Individual Education Plans.

As this study is addressing recommendations from the Shean Report it will focus on the attitudes of primary school teachers in Western Australia. The majority of the recommendations demonstrated concern with early identification and intervention of students with specific learning difficulties in the primary years (EDWA, 1993).

### Purpose

Given the lack of research on how well Individual Education Plans will be accepted in schools in Western Australia, the aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of primary school teachers in Western Australia towards Individual Education Plans.

### Significance

As stated before, the majority of literature and research regarding Individual Education Plans is based on education settings in the United States. Although it is important to extract components and ideas from that literature and research, they must be contextualised to the Western Australian system in order to make the components and ideas relevant for a Western Australian system.

Two potential outcomes of this research are:

1. It should identify the specific anxieties and apprehensions which teachers in mainstream Western Australian primary schools have in regard to the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans. Their knowledge of the components of Individual Education Plans as well as their personal reviews of literature carried out by some teachers may affect their feelings toward Individual Education Plans. This is relevant because the effective development and implementation of Individual Education Plans in the classroom could be affected.

2. It should assess teachers' perceptions of the current availability and adequacy of classroom support and resources for teachers of students experiencing difficulties with learning in mainstream Western Australian primary schools.

Such an assessment is important because it will help researchers to determine how feasible mainstream Western Australian primary school teachers perceive the implementation of Individual Education Plans (recommendation sixteen of the Shean report), to be.

### Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined, for use in this research:

#### Attitudes.

"Attitudes are a combination of beliefs, feelings and evaluations, coupled with some predisposition to act accordingly" (Gleitman, 1991, p. 459).

#### Individual Education Plan.

An Individual Education Plan is an education plan, tailored to meet the individual needs of students experiencing difficulties with learning. One example of the components of an Individual Education Plan is from the United State's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] (1994) model (Polloway & Patton, 1993; Westwood, 1993):

- a) A statement of the student's current level;
- b) A statement of annual goals;
- c) A statement of short term objectives, stated in behavioural terms;
- d) Documentation of special services and provision of education;
- e) A time-line, for initiating services and anticipated duration;
- f) Evaluation procedures using objective criteria.

(Polloway & Patton, 1993; Westwood, 1993).

#### Individuals With Disabilities in Education Act, or IDEA (Public Law 94 - 142 -

The Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975)

The cornerstone of this law is "the provision of a free, appropriate public education to handicapped students" (Strickland, Turnbull & Brantley, 1990, p. 2). The major components of this law are:

- a) "A right to free appropriate education";
- b) "Non - discriminatory evaluation procedures";
- c) "Procedural Due Process";
- d) "Individualised education plans";
- e) "Least Restrictive Environment" (known in Western Australia as "Educationally enhancing environment" [EDWA, 1992, p. 3 ]), (Wood, 1993, p. 13 - 15).

### Shean Report.

A report of the Ministerial Task Force on the Education of Students with Disabilities and specific learning difficulties. The Shean report (1993) includes sixty one recommendations for better education for these students (Shean, 1993). The students targeted in the Shean Report are students with specific learning difficulties, defined below.

### Students with specific learning difficulties.

Students with specific learning difficulties are "those students who are experiencing difficulties with learning in literacy and numeracy and those students who appear to have long-term specific learning difficulties such as attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, etc." (EDWA, 1993, p. 1).

### Students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities are "students with intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, vision or hearing impairments and autism, who are eligible for Education Support services under the Education Department of Western Australia Policy and Guidelines for the Education of Students with Disabilities" (EDWA, 1993, p. 1).

### Devolution.

Devolution refers to a "shift in power and responsibility to make certain kinds of decisions from a central authority to a school" (Calwell & Spinks, 1989, p. 5).

" Some of the decision making responsibilities involving the allocation of human, financial, material and curriculum resources are shifted to schools, however, they continue to work within a framework of legislation, policies and priorities determined by the central authority, hence they remain part of a system." (Ministerial Independent Assessment Group on Devolution, 1994, p. 1).

### Research Questions

The main research question which the proposed study will address is:

1. What are the attitudes of primary school teachers in Western Australia towards the implementation of individual education plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom?

In order to identify possible factors which may have led to the formation of these attitudes, a number of subsidiary questions are also addressed during the course of the study. The subsidiary questions are:

1. What are Western Australian primary school teachers' perceptions of the rights of students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom?
2. What are Western Australian primary teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of teaching strategies for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom?
3. What are Western Australian primary teachers' perceptions of the value of the effects of individual education plans in the regular classroom?
4. What are teachers' beliefs about the use of the general classroom programs in order to teach students with specific learning difficulties be taught in the regular classroom?
5. What are teachers' beliefs about the use of mixed ability groups in order to teach students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom?
6. What are teachers' beliefs about the use of streamed ability groups in order to teach students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom?
7. What are teachers' beliefs about teaching students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom using Individual Education Plans?

8. What are teachers' perceptions of using the same teaching strategies for students with specific learning difficulties as the other students in the regular classroom?
9. What are teachers' perceptions of the availability of adequate support services and resources to help them cater for students with specific learning difficulties?
10. What are teachers' beliefs regarding the appropriate class sizes for individual education plans to be successful?

## CHAPTER TWO :

### Literature Review

The purpose of this literature chapter is to review information from previous research regarding teachers' attitudes and Individual Education Plans, in order to provide a context for the study. Three areas of literature are relevant to this study: a) general literature regarding teachers attitudes towards students experiencing difficulties with learning; b) United States and Western Australian education policies, guidelines and Education Acts; and c) research literature pertaining to teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans. The review of literature will survey these areas with respect to the attitudes teachers hold towards the employment of Individual Education Plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning in regular primary classrooms.

The majority of the information regarding teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans comes from educational settings in the United States. Few studies have been found which investigate teachers' attitudes towards using Individual Education Plans in regular classrooms in Australia (Bennett, Shaddock & Bennett, 1994). It is necessary to extract relevant ideas regarding teachers' attitudes to Individual Education Plans from previous findings in United States studies and view them in light of the Western Australian education system in order to determine their usefulness. As such, it is necessary to provide a basic outline of both United States and Western Australia education systems.

Research on teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans and students experiencing difficulties with learning can be found in a number of studies conducted in the United States. These studies aided in the design of appropriate questions and constructs for the Western Australian questionnaire. Research on the methodology used to measure teachers' attitudes also provided information on the design and use of questionnaires and the formation of attitudes. Strengths and weaknesses previously discovered by various researchers, enhanced the design and implementation of the questionnaire used in this study.

## Teachers' attitudes towards students experiencing difficulties with learning

Many of the items in the questionnaire are based on the literature regarding teachers' attitudes towards students experiencing difficulties with learning.

The aim of such items is to determine the attitudes of Western Australian teachers towards students experiencing difficulties with learning, as the majority of the literature pertaining to such attitudes comes from the United States. The majority of this literature from the United States, regarding teachers' attitudes towards students experiencing difficulties with learning, shows that teachers often label students with specific learning difficulties and view them in a negative light (Casey, 1984; Dyer, 1991; Coil, 1992). Thus, students experiencing difficulties with learning are not catered for effectively (Casey, 1984).

Students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom are given many labels. Labels include, 'slow,' 'underachievers,' 'lazy,' 'dyslexic,' 'hyperactive,' 'withdrawn,' 'manic depressive,' and 'Attention Deficit Disorder' (ADD) (Dyer, 1991). Many of the terms used to describe students experiencing difficulties with learning follow them from one year to the next (Coil, 1992). The derogatory nature of many of the terms, is indicative of the attitudes of teachers, and hence, other students and parents (Dyer, 1991). Teachers' attitudes are conveyed to students through both verbal and non-verbal messages.

People often hold low expectations of students experiencing difficulties with learning. This may result in the realisation of self fulfilling prophecies resulting from such expectations (Coil, 1992). In the past, teachers have tended to underestimate the abilities of students experiencing difficulties with learning. Educators, parents and the wider community have shown a lack of tolerance towards students experiencing difficulties with learning. This is demonstrated by many regular classroom teachers, as students experiencing difficulties with learning are fitted into existing programs rather than provided with flexible and creative new programs addressing their specific and individual needs (Coil, 1992).

Misconceptions held by teachers about students abilities may also negatively affect planning and implementation of programs and policies (Marozas & May, 1988).



## United States and Western Australia education policies, guidelines and acts

Not only have educators, parents and the wider community in Western Australia been less tolerant of students with learning difficulties, but also their attitudes towards students with specific learning difficulties has been prevalent in legislation (EDWA, 1976). The current Western Australia Education Amendment Act 1976 does not provide students with a right to education. In the United States students have a right to a free and appropriate education, in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1994). This is different to Western Australia, where parents are required to send their children to school. Any student considered too difficult to manage in the regular classroom, can be transferred to a more segregated setting at the discretion of the Education Minister. If the student's behaviour is seen as too disruptive, s/he may be denied a free public education, also at the Education Minister's decree (EDWA, 1976).

In the past decade, a number of reports have been presented which addressed the lack in provision for students experiencing difficulties with learning in Western Australia schools. The reports include the Beazley report (1984) and the Shean report (1993). A number of recommendations arose from both of these reports. However, it was not until the publication of the Shean Report in 1993 that any practical moves were made toward implementing these recommendations. The most recent attempt to realise these recommendations, has been the creation of the Learning Difficulties Program and Project.

### The Beazley Report.

In 1984, The Beazley Report, set out a number of common and agreed national goals for schooling in Western Australia, one of which was recommendation 201. Recommendation 201 stated that, "To promote equality of educational opportunities, and to provide for groups with special learning requirements" (p. 404). This recommendation suggested the importance of recognising the rights of students with disabilities. The rights outlined in recommendation 201 were to an education that may enable the achievement of personal excellence, as well as independence, as far as possible, in everyday life.

Recommendation 201 indicated that the rights of students with special learning requirements be firmly embedded in the system by incorporating them into the Education Act. In 1992 a Social Justice Policy for students with disabilities was published. The Social Justice Policy for students with disabilities (1992) has implications for regular classrooms, as many students in regular classrooms experience difficulties with learning (Doenu, 1984).

The Western Australia Amendment Act (1976) remains unchanged, despite the recommendations from the Beazley Report and changes which have occurred in the regular classroom over the past few years (EDWA, 1993). The Shean report is the most recent attempt to address the needs and rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning. The Shean Report outlines the responsibilities of teachers and parents who play a significant role in the education of students experiencing difficulties with learning.

#### The Shean Report.

In 1992, a Task Force on the Education of Students with specific learning difficulties, with Ruth Shean as chairperson, was convened by State Government in response to parental concerns. The report released sixty one recommendations. Of these, fifty were adopted for development by the Department of Education.

A Learning Difficulties Program group which was already in existence as a response to parental concerns regarding ADD was adopted by the Department of Education to target recommendation 16 of the Shean Report.

This recommended that:

"Schools implement a system of Individualised Education Programs for all students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties; and,

a) that in every school Individual Education Plans for all students with specific learning difficulties be developed and regularly reviewed in conjunction with students, parents, teachers and other relevant professionals;

b) that the Individual Education Plans move with the student as they progress through the school or move from one school to another;

c) that a per capita grant be available to schools for materials to develop and implement Individual Education Plans and that schools be expected to augment the grants with school funds" (Shean, 1993, p x - xi).

The purpose of the Learning Difficulties Program is "to develop and implement in-service programs statewide which will assist schools improve educational outcomes for students experiencing difficulties with learning" (EDWA, 1994 ). A specific focus of this group has been professional development programs to assist teachers with the design of Individual Education Plans (also referred to as Collaborative Action Plans) for students experiencing difficulties with learning, as proposed in Recommendation 16 of the Shean Report.

The Education Department responded to all recommendations from the Shean Report. The Education Department of Western Australia responded to recommendation 16 of the Shean Report with a policy objective stating that " The Education Department will develop strategies over the next triennium to enable this recommendation to be implemented and to report on its implementation in its annual report" (EDWA, 1994, p. 6). This will be addressed through the learning difficulties program who have been working on parts (a) "that in every school Individual Education Plans for all students with specific learning difficulties be developed and regularly reviewed in conjunction with students, parents, teachers and other relevant specialists" (Shean, 1993, p. x), and (b) "that the Individual Education Plans move with the student as they progress through the school or move from one school to another" (p. x) of the recommendation, providing professional development to some Government school teachers. Part (c) of recommendation 16, "that a per capita grant be available to schools for materials to develop and implement Individual Education Plans and that schools be expected to augment the grants with school funds" (Shean, 1993, p. xi), has been taken into account through the provision of a blanket \$6 million fund, part of which will be used to allow for the implementation of this recommendation.

Another group, the Learning Difficulties Project, was formed as a result of the Shean Report.

The purpose of the Learning Difficulties Project is "to implement those recommendations of the Shean Report on the Education of Students with Disabilities and Specific Learning Difficulties for which the Education Services Division has responsibility," (EDWA, 1995, p. 2). There are six project areas which the Learning Difficulties Project is working on: Policy and guidelines implementation; financial, accessing Shean funds; auditing schools; professional development, with an administrative focus on how to appropriate funds; public relations; and, divisional liaison. State policies are currently being developed by this project to address the needs of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom.

Currently, 20 people in a policy working group are creating policies regarding students experiencing difficulties with learning through the Learning Development Project at Central Office of Education Department of Western Australia. The formation of this group arises from recommendation 31 of the Shean Report. Recommendation 31 states "that the central office of the Education Department of Western Australia, as a matter of urgency, prepare a policy and guidelines for the education of students with specific learning difficulties" (Shean, 1993, p. xiv). The Government responded to this by stating that "The Education Department will commence work immediately on a policy and guidelines as part of a broader statement on learning difficulties in the areas of literacy and numeracy" (EDWA, 1994, p. 9), hence, the creation of the Learning Difficulties Project.

The Task Force stated that recommendation 16 was one of their key recommendations and as such a number of key outcomes were envisaged. The key outcomes of this recommendation were seen as being: To ensure students' individual educational needs are met; that all stakeholders (psychologist, parent, teacher and student) are involved; that the program is continued even when placement changes and when two or more settings are involved; and that adequate resources are allocated (both human and material) (Shean, 1993).

### Summary of teachers' attitudes to students with specific learning difficulties

Much of the research and literature upon which the Learning Difficulties Program is based comes from the United States. Due to the differences between the Western Australia and United States education systems, United States literature is not wholly relevant to the Australian system. Therefore, the Learning Difficulties Program has taken key elements from United States formats of Individual Education Plans and adapted them to Collaborative Action Plans in order to suit the Western Australia education system. The term Individual Education Plan and Collaborative Action Plan will be used interchangeably, as Individual Education Plan is a more common term that appears more often in the literature, than Collaborative Action Plan.

The ideas which need to be extracted are vital components of Individual Education Plans from the United States. The main components of Individual Education Plans in the United States are: Evaluation and identification; program planning; funding; transition programs for students leaving the system; parental involvement; and team meetings with teacher, parents, student, principals and specialist advisers (Bateman, 1992). The Learning Difficulties Program has adopted all of these components and made mention of the importance of them in the envisaged outcomes of recommendation 16 (EDWA, 1994).

Existing initiatives within the system and the needs of the individuals, students, teachers, parents and the community (key players in the Collaborative Action Plan (EDWA, 1994)) will determine the aspects considered for inclusion in an individual's Collaborative Action Plan. The existing initiatives in Western Australia include first steps and devolution. Devolution is the employment of collaborative processes and school based decision making. The process of devolution will mean that the way in which each school implements Individual Education Plans could differ from school to school. The roles and responsibilities of individual key players will also differ between schools. This may be due to a number of factors including needs of the student and teachers' perceptions of Individual Education Plans. Furthermore, teachers' attitudes toward Individual Education Plans may affect the degree of responsibility accepted by keyplayers.

### Teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans

A useful example of Individual Education Plans is the three step process introduced in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States (Bateman, 1992). Although this Act focuses on students with more severe problems, rather than students experiencing difficulties with learning in areas of literacy and numeracy, the principles and components which can be drawn from IDEA are valuable guidelines for developing Collaborative Action Plans. IDEA has been refined a number of times since it was first established in 1975, in the United States, as Public Law 94 - 142 : The Education of All Handicapped Children's Act. Due to the refining process of trial and error in the United States, the concept of Individual Education Plans in IDEA serves as a useful source of information for program developers in Western Australia when creating a suitable model for the Western Australia system. Literature from the United States will also provide educators with information regarding pitfalls in the Individual Education Plan process, based on refined Acts. At the heart of IDEA are two vital principles which underlie the development of Individual Education Plans: parent participation in the process; and, the services offered must be based absolutely on students' needs, and not the availability of services (IDEA, 1994).

An IDEA process outlined by Bateman (1992) involves three steps: firstly, evaluation and identification of students to determine eligibility for Individual Education Plans and the needs of the student which must be addressed; secondly, planning an appropriate education plan which involves the specification of members for the Individual Education Plan team; and finally, placement in the least restrictive environment (Bateman, 1992). In Western Australia, the least restrictive environment, is termed "educationally enhanced environment" (EDWA, 1993). Furthermore, IDEA requires that these students be provided with funding for assessment, resources and specialist help.

The United States model, explained above, is a disability model (Howell & Morehead, 1988) which is aimed at students with disabilities and focuses on students' disabilities.

**IDEA (1994) states that the Individual Education Plan for each student must include:**

- A statement of the student's present level of educational performance;**
- A statement of annual goals, including short term instructional objectives;**
- A statement of the specific special education and related services and the extent to which the student can participate in the regular classroom;**
- The projected dates for the initiation of services and anticipated duration of services; and**
- Appropriate objective criteria and evaluation procedures and schedules for determining, at least on an annual basis, whether short term objectives are being achieved.**

**A lot can be learned about the implementation of Individual Education Plans through reviewing their success in the United States. The United States model of Individual Education Plans is an extremely valuable guide for teachers. It has proven to be as much a managerial device as an educational tool (Bateman, 1992). This is because it provides a statement of the student's present level, annual goals, short term objectives, statement of specific services to be provided, as well as an indicator of how much the student will participate in the regular program. The Learning Difficulties Program has taken concepts of Individual Education Plans and adapted them to suit the Western Australia education system as Collaborative Action Plans.**

**The model which will be used in Western Australia is a functional model (Howell & Morehead, 1987). A functional model looks at the environmental factors which need to be considered. The Western Australian model is less rigid than the model implemented in the United States. It encourages teachers to examine the problems of an individual and determine overall environmental changes which could unfold for the entire class or a group within the class (Howell & Morehead, 1987). Through the investigation of teachers attitudes towards Individual Education Plans, any potential problems with their implementation in the regular classroom may be reduced. This research should enable the Learning Difficulties Program to determine the effectiveness of their professional development program.**

The effectiveness of professional development may be established through an examination of teachers' attitudes prior to professional development, as this study does, and comparing attitudes towards using Individual Education Plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning after professional development.

#### United States Findings on Teacher Attitudes to Individual Education Programs.

Literature from the United States provides information about teachers' attitudes to Individual Education Plans. The literature examines the attitudes and perceptions of teachers toward the use of Individual Education Plans and the variables which influence their attitudes.

A number of attitudes have been identified by research carried out in the United States as being characteristic of the regular classroom teacher, regarding the attitudes of teachers toward students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom and the implementation of Individual Education Plans. Wood (1993) found that teachers' initial responses to Individual Education Plans were caution and anxiety. Teachers tended to display caution and anxiety due to their lack of skills in teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning.

Teachers appear to lack confidence in catering for students experiencing difficulties with learning as a result of their initial training. Semmel, Abernathy, Butera and Lesar (1991) found in a study conducted with regular classroom teachers and special education teachers, that regular teachers did not feel that their initial training had provided them with the necessary skills to adapt instruction for students experiencing difficulties with learning. The findings from Semmel et al. (1991) are supported by other researchers/experts in the field of Special Education (Turnbull & Schulz, 1991; Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993; Ward, Center & Brochner, 1994; Webber, Anderson & Otey, 1991).

Regular teachers display caution toward the use of Individual Education Plans which will affect policy implementation. Ward et al. (1994) found that professional attitudes may affect the implementation of policies and the success of innovative challenging programmes such as the implementation of Individual Education Plans.



Furthermore, those directly affected by policy change, (that is classroom teachers), appeared more cautious toward the use of Individual Education Plans than their colleagues involved in administration or special education. As the majority of this literature is from the United States, it is necessary to view the information in light of current Western Australia policy, guidelines and practice. It is necessary to consider devolution, the Western Australia Amendment Act (1976), the Beazley Report (1984) and the Shean Report (1993). Details of the Western Australian Amendment Act, The Beazley Report and The Shean Report have been provided earlier in the chapter.

#### Australian Findings on Individual Education Plans.

The other known significant study conducted in Australia investigated all teachers who had been involved with Individual Education Plans, through the New England Educational Diagnostic (NEED) centre in NSW over the past three years (Bennett, Shaddock & Bennett, 1994). The aim of this investigation was to assess teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of Individual Education Plans. The study looked at the development, planning and implementation of Individual Education Plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning in regular classrooms. The study also aimed to determine the extent to which these teachers shared the views of their American counterparts in relation to Individual Education Plans.

The views of NEED teachers towards the usefulness of Individual Education Plans were, on the whole, more positive than their American counterparts. NEED teachers rated Individual Education Plans as effective tools for planning and delivery. However, time was an issue of importance for NEED teachers. Teachers felt that the use of Individual Education Plans was time consuming (Bennett, Shaddock & Bennett, 1994). This perception was different from teachers in the United States who felt that Individual Education Plans were time wasting and resulted in increased paperwork, accountability and worry about possible conflict with special education teachers (Wood, 1993).

NEED teachers may have shown more optimism towards the use of Individual Education Plans in regular classrooms because of their involvement in research.

The research involved training in the development of Individual Education Plans, supervised implementation and follow up discussions. This allowed for trial and error as well as support from others involved in the same program. This was different from United States teachers who are required by law (IDEA, 1994) to implement Individual Education Plans for all students with disabilities. Teachers in the United States do not have the choice which teachers participating in the NEED sample had about whether or not to partake in the implementation of Individual Education Plans.

Furthermore, teachers in the United States were catering for students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms whilst the NEED sample of teachers were catering for students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom. The difference between the two groups being catered for may also have impacted upon the difference in attitudes between United States and NEED teachers.

The research carried out by Bennett and others (1994) is a close example of what is occurring as a result of the Learning Difficulties Program. The similarities are due to both the type of students who are targeted by the NEED program and the sample group of regular classroom teachers. The NEED sample used Individual Education Plans as part of a consultancy model. This model provided additional assistance to students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom. This is different from the students targeted by IDEA in the United States, who have disabilities.

#### Advantages of Individual Education Programs.

When designing a study such as this it may also be useful to review literature from the United States regarding the advantages of Individual Education Plans. Wood, (1992), and Donaldson, (1993) found that the creation and maintenance of positive teacher attitudes towards students with specific learning difficulties may be achieved through the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans. Individual Education Plans may be useful tools in the prevention of potential problems which regular teachers and students experiencing difficulties with learning encounter (Wood, 1993). Individual Education Plans encourage teachers to consider students' individual needs and plan accordingly.

As teachers' anxieties about Individual Education Plans are due partly to fear of the unknown (Wood, 1993), information sessions explaining how teachers can utilise Individual Education Plans should be developed. Discussion of strategies in a structured forum for teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning, will enhance information sessions.

In a forum such as professional development, teachers are able to consult with professionals already trained in the area of special education. They may also be provided with information about how to contact experts in certain fields as well as identify the availability of support services. Clear, concise information will empower teachers, as they take responsibility for educating students experiencing difficulties with learning in their classrooms. Information may reduce teachers' anxieties about the implementation of Individual Education Plans and enable them to cater effectively for students experiencing difficulties with learning.

Positive attitudes about the performance of students experiencing difficulties with learning will also affect the behaviour of teachers, and in turn, the behaviour of relevant students (Rogers, 1990) and parents. In order to elicit positive attitudes, collaboration between teachers and parents needs to be improved. This point was emphasised in IDEA (1994). Communication between parents and teachers will empower both parties with necessary skills, if teacher anxiety is reduced. Parents must not be viewed as teachers, but rather as contributors. Likewise, students must also be given a sense of responsibility and ownership for their own learning, with the guidance of the regular classroom teacher. According to Whitin, Mills & O'Keefe, (1990), teachers can learn a lot about students from their parents. Parents are able to offer valuable information which could be used to promote student success and therefore enhance the development of the Individual Education Plans.

The attitudes of parents may also affect the students' performance and attainment of both long term goals and short term objectives (Dyer, 1991). A lack of understanding or involvement in their children's education may result in negative parent attitudes towards Individual Education Plans and low expectations of their children who experience difficulties with learning.

In order to avoid the latter, it is necessary for teachers to involve parents in their children's education. Involving parents requires teachers to work in cooperation with parents and provide them with information about recommendations and policies, such as recommendation 16 of the Shean Report (Shean, 1993). Information should be provided in a confident and optimistic manner in order to evoke positive attitudes from parents concerning the performance of their children and attainment of long term goals and short term objectives.

### Conclusion

Findings regarding Individual Education Plans implementation and teachers' attitudes towards them from the United States, have been beneficial to progress in Western Australia educational changes and recommendations. The findings deal with teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans, perceived advantages of Individual Education Plans, and the effectiveness of the IDEA model of Individual Education Plans. It may be possible to create positive teacher attitudes toward implementing Individual Education Plans and catering for students experiencing difficulties with learning. Positive attitudes may be created through the utilisation of findings from the United States, regarding teachers' attitudes to Individual Education Plans, IDEA components and vital principles underlying IDEA.

In order to create positive attitudes an understanding of the differences between the Western Australia and United States education systems is necessary. The findings then need to be viewed in light of Western Australia initiatives such as First Steps (1992) and devolution, and be used to create professional development programs. By surveying teachers attitudes prior to and after participation in professional development, the effectiveness of training can be gauged. This study should determine the attitudes of regular Western Australia classroom teachers prior to professional development.

The proposed research will attempt to answer the following questions: To what extent do teachers wish to employ Individual Education Plans in their classrooms/schools? What do teachers feel the perceived failures and successes of such a recommendation are?

**What are teachers' views on support, preparedness, and their attitudes towards practicable implementation (class size, time, resources, etc) of Individual Education Plans?**

It is evident from the research carried out regarding teacher's attitudes towards Individual Education Plans in the United States that regular classroom teachers harbour a number of concerns and anxieties towards the use of Individual Education Plans. With the release of the Shean Report, the use of Individual Education Plans in regular classrooms has become an important and sensitive issue in our system. The lack of Western Australia research into teachers' attitudes to date presents a need for such research to be carried out. Causes for anxiety and concern, presented in United States literature, may be avoided, through researching the attitudes of Western Australian teachers.

The Australian study by Bennett et al. (1994) involves a sample of regular classroom teachers who have been trained to develop Individual Education Plans and work with students experiencing difficulties with learning in regular classrooms. This is representative of the population which will be affected if a policy regarding Individual Education Plans is put in place in Western Australia. Therefore, this study will choose a sample which is representative of the population of mainstream Western Australian teachers. The questionnaire design, must consider the advantages and disadvantages discovered in the past, in order to increase reliability and validity and improve the credibility of the research.

In summary, Individual Education Plans are commonplace in the United States and Shean Report recommendations suggest that it is only a matter of time before Individual Education Plans become commonplace in Western Australia. The previous research regarding teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans suggests that positive teacher attitudes may be created, in Western Australia, through the utilisation of findings from the United States, regarding teachers' attitudes to Individual Education Plans. Currently United States literature reveals that teachers tended to display caution and anxiety due to their lack of skills in teaching students with specific learning difficulties as a result of their initial teacher training.

Through understanding the reasons for these negative attitudes in the United States such attitudes might be reduced in the Western Australian process towards the use of Individual Education Plans. Finally, the constructs for this study are based on the literature and will be discussed in detail in chapter three.

## CHAPTER THREE: Method of Investigation

### Design of Study

The study involved survey research and utilised a questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to collect information about the attitudes of regular classroom teachers towards the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans in the classroom for students experiencing difficulties with learning.

### Sample.

The sample was three hundred teachers, from regular and Priority Support Program (PSP) schools in the Perth Metropolitan area. Subjects were chosen through a process of stratified random selection (Burns, 1994) from grades one to seven. Participation in the study also required the agreement of the principal. A written request, (See Appendix A), including the purpose of the proposed study, notice of confidentiality, letter from the research supervisor (Appendix B) and the questionnaire were sent to the Principal.

### Instrument.

Teacher attitudes toward the use of Individual Education Plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom were investigated by collecting information using a questionnaire developed by the researcher, (See Appendix C). A questionnaire was constructed specifically for the purposes of this study. The reasons for designing a questionnaire specifically for this study included, the use of terminology that was appropriate to the study and choosing variables and constructs considered to be relevant to the study and the sample group (Burns, 1994).

The questionnaire developed for this study included two main sections. Section one was designed to gather data about the teacher and their school. The questions required the respondent to tick the appropriate alternative. Questions in this section focused on:

1. Teacher experience in teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom;
2. School status (eg., Priority Support Program schools or regular schools).

Section two consisted of statements aimed at gathering information regarding teacher attitudes towards Individual Education Plans. The statements were based on three constructs:

1. Teachers' perceptions of the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom;
2. Teachers' perceptions of the effects of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom;
3. Teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities for teaching students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom.

Seven, seven, and six items were derived for each construct, respectively. A further six separate statements were also included. Altogether, there were twenty six Likert scale items. Commonly, 50% of mail questionnaires are not returned (Blackmore, 1990). Three hundred requests and questionnaires were sent out, and there were one hundred and forty five responses. An explanation about which literature the constructs were derived from is provided later in the validity section.

### Reliability.

A pilot study was carried out in order to determine the internal consistency of the Likert-type items. The pilot questionnaire was trailed with thirty teachers, randomly selected from Government primary schools, in the metropolitan area from both special education and regular education settings. Reliability was calculated using the Edstats statistical program (Knibb, 1994). If the reliability of the instrument was low, with an alpha coefficient below .60 (Linn and Gronlund, 1995) the items were reviewed, based on item discriminations. The items that did not correlate with the totals of other items were removed, placed in a more appropriate construct or adjusted in order to improve the reliability of the final study.



An item discrimination of less than .03 was considered too low to be included in the construct and was either removed, reorganised or adjusted (Linn & Gronlund, 1995).

### Validity.

Construct and content validity were considered for the purpose of the study. Construct validity was enhanced through the provision of a list of definitions of relevant terms. This helped respondents interpret terms consistently. The questionnaire was compared to a previous American study which utilised a survey known as the Regular Education Initiative Teacher Survey (Semmel, et al., 1991).

The content of the questionnaire was identified through a review of literature. Based on the literature three constructs and seven separate statements were identified. Coil (1992) found that teacher's perceptions of students with specific learning difficulties may determine teacher expectations regarding the performance of these students. Furthermore, Dyer (1991) found that labelling may adversely affect teacher's perceptions of the rights of students with specific learning difficulties.

Construct one, teacher's perceptions of the rights of students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom, was chosen in an attempt to identify the attitudes of the sample towards students with specific learning difficulties. It was assumed from the literature (Coil, 1992; Dyer, 1991) that the investigation of teacher's attitudes regarding the basic rights of students with specific learning difficulties may provide information about the way in which teachers cater for these students.

Research by Wood (1993) found that teachers' initial responses to the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans were cautious. Teachers in the United States (Wood, 1993) and in Australia (Bennett, et al., 1994), have demonstrated negativity regarding their perceptions of the effects of Individual Education Plans. Construct two, teachers' perceptions of the value of the effects of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom, aims to determine Western Australian primary school teachers' perceptions of the effects of Individual Education Plans.

Semmel et al. (1991) found that regular teachers in the United States did not feel that their initial teacher training had provided them with the necessary skills to cater for students with specific learning difficulties. The purpose of construct three was to determine the perceptions of Western Australian primary school teachers regarding their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom. Furthermore, they may demonstrate the type of skills and abilities which teachers in Western Australia perceive to be most lacking when catering for students with specific learning difficulties.

In part, the purpose of three of the separate statements is to determine what teachers consider to be effective teaching strategies for students with specific learning difficulties in Western Australian primary school classrooms. Research from the United States shows that often students with specific learning difficulties are fitted into existing programs rather than provided for with flexible and creative new programs addressing their specific and individual needs (Coil, 1992).

Finally, the six separate statements also aimed to determine the general beliefs of Western Australian primary school teachers regarding students with specific learning difficulties and Individual Education Plans. The literature uncovered a few general attitudes held by teachers. The most common attitude toward implementing Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom was one of caution (Wood, 1993). This statements should uncover general beliefs held by Western Australian primary school teachers regarding teaching students with specific learning difficulties and the use of Individual Education Plans.

For each construct a number of items was generated to cover possible aspects of the construct and a representative sample included in the questionnaire. The items were discussed with experts in the field of Children with Special Needs at Edith Cowan University, and Annette Sale, head of the Learning Difficulties Program, to determine the content validity of each item.

### Data Collection Procedures

A letter requesting permission from the Principal to include teachers in the study was sent to randomly selected Western Australian schools in the metropolitan area. The letter explained the nature of the study, how data was to be used, how the study may benefit the field of education, and the level of confidentiality. The questionnaire was included for the perusal by prospective respondents.

The mail survey questionnaire was sent with a cover letter to individual teachers. Teachers were required to return the questionnaires to the reception at their school within one week. At the end of the week a reminder notice was sent out, to all teachers whose questionnaires had not yet been returned to increase the response rate. A follow up note thanking participants for their help and cooperation was sent to all respondents after they returned their questionnaires (See Appendix D).

### Data Analysis Procedures

The data collected required both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Overall responses were analysed to determine general findings from the sample as a whole. Data obtained from section one of the questionnaire (demographic information) was then used to determine whether significant differences existed among groups of teachers (identified by year taught, location and qualifications).

Section two of the questionnaire consisted of Likert-type items. Scoring procedures for the Likert-type items involved assigning responses a score from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (7). The exception being reverse scored items. For example, an item response of strongly agree instead of being assigned a score of seven, was assigned a score of one. Variable and item means were calculated, also the standard deviation for each variable around its mean was calculated to indicate item variance.

### Limitations.

Due to the nature of the questionnaire research, the response rate is often low (Burns, 1994). In order to limit this, personalised questionnaires were sent directly to the respondent and reminder letters were sent out a week after the questionnaires, encouraging prompt return.

The Likert type questions may have limited the responses of participants (Burns, 1994). The limited responses may have been partly due to the non committal mid scale answers, that is the middle point on an uneven Likert type scale, for example, point four on a seven point scale (as is the case in this instrument). The limited responses may have been avoided by providing an 'I don't know' category, and forcing teachers to make a choice on the Likert scale with an even scale of four or six points. Generalisability was limited, as the study focused on government primary schools in the metropolitan area, including Priority Support Program schools. Therefore it was specific to the population of concern and could not be replicated for independent, non government primary schools, high schools or country schools. Finally, attitudes are not always consistent with behaviour (Callan, et al., 1991) and responses may be influenced by the questionnaire intent, leading to possible response bias.

### Ethical Considerations.

Anonymity and confidentiality of responses, may be of concern for those involved, limiting response rate. Prospective participants were assured of both in a letter of request. This letter stated that only the researcher and the supervisor would view the complete questionnaires and furthermore, that the questionnaires would be destroyed on completion of the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR :

### Instrument Design and Reliability Analysis

The literature pertaining to the methodology used in previous studies for measuring teachers' attitudes was reviewed in order to design a suitable questionnaire for this study. It was based on literature regarding such methodology that the initial instrument was constructed. An informal review by specialists in special education at Edith Cowan University and a pilot study lead to changes toward a final instrument. These changes will be explained in detail later in this chapter.

#### Pre-pilot construct development

##### Literature review.

The literature regarding research on the methodology used to measure teacher attitudes includes information on attitude formation and behaviour in general. This literature provided useful information in constructing the instrument. A widely used method for obtaining information about a person's attitudes is by administration of a questionnaire (Weiten, 1992). In designing an instrument which aims to measure attitudes it is important to understand the formation of attitudes and the link between these attitudes and a person's behaviour.

Generally, four types of items are used in the construction of questionnaires (Burns, 1994): closed items, that provide ordered or unordered answer choices, for the respondent to choose (Dillman, 1978); open ended items, which require the respondent to answer in writing, using their own words, on the questionnaire form (Singleton, Straits, Straits & McAllister, 1993); scale items, which are a set of verbal items to which the respondent indicates degrees of agreement or disagreement (Burns, 1994); and, binary forced choice with two options, such as, agree or disagree. Binary forced choice is likely to reduce socially biased answers or non committal mid scale answers (Simmel, et al., 1991).

In this study a questionnaire was posted to participants. There may be a number of limitations and strengths in the administration of questionnaires, specifically those posted to participants. The greatest limitation appears to be the difficulty in securing an adequate response rate. A minimally adequate response rate is considered to be fifty percent (Burns, 1994). Respondents may find it easy to discard questionnaires, resulting in low response rates and leading to possible sample bias (Deschamp & Tagnolini, 1988). The instrument may elicit poor responses if the items are too ambiguous, vague or complex. Another potential limitation associated with questionnaires includes a general lack of flexibility in responses to items, unless they are open ended. Although, all questions are open to misinterpretation by both researchers and respondents, whether they be closed (likert type scales) or open ended. Misinterpretations may result from poor wording or differential meaning of terms.

Questionnaires that are posted to participants have a number of possible advantages, over a face to face interview. These advantages include cost efficiency and reduced bias, as participants are required to answer identical questions, and a reduction in errors based on interviewer interpretation of responses as participants are required to record responses, rather than having an interviewer record responses for them (Burns, 1994). Furthermore, Deschamp and Tagnolini, (1988), suggest that more truthful responses can be elicited if confidentiality is assured. This confidentiality also minimises fear and embarrassment which may be experienced, as direct contact with an interviewer is avoided. Finally, Burns (1994) emphasises the advantage of being able to include responses from people in more remote areas. Inclusion of participants from remote areas, will increase the number of targeted respondents. It is important when designing a questionnaire that the limitations and strengths of the survey are considered. Taking account of these should increase both reliability and validity of the questionnaire, and consequently the credibility of the research.

## Attitudes.

According to Weiten (1989), attitudes are "...evaluative and involve making social judgements" (p. 606). There are three basic components of attitudes, cognitive, affective and behavioural. The cognitive component is made up of the beliefs about the object of an attitude, for instance, the belief that Individual Education Plans are or are not beneficial to students experiencing difficulties with learning. The affective component refers to the emotional feelings stimulated by an attitude object (Weiten, 1989), for example, a teacher may like or dislike the idea of Individual Education Plans, embracing them or resenting having to implement them. The behavioural component consists of predispositions to act in certain ways toward an attitude object such as using or not using Individual Education Plans in the classroom for students experiencing difficulties with learning (Weiten, 1989). Awareness of the components of attitudes may be beneficial when creating an instrument that measures attitudes, as they may provide greater insight to responses.

The literature from Australian and United States studies provided a basis for the development of the draft questionnaire. The draft questionnaire contained 48 likert type statements. There were five or six items in each of nine constructs. The literature, from which the items were derived, looked at regular classroom teachers' attitudes towards developing and implementing Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom. Few Australian studies were found, with the exception of the NEED study (Bennett et al., 1994), nearly all the literature was from the United States. The nine constructs used to organise the first questionnaire were based on ideas found in the literature (Coil, 1992; Dyer, 1991; Bennett, 1994; Turnbull & Shulz, 1991; Goodlad & Lovitt, 1993; Ward et al., 1994; Webber et al., 1991).

## Discussion with reviewers.

The instrument was internally reviewed by special education coordinator, Dr David Evans and Annette Sales, Head of the Learning Difficulties Program for the Department of Education.

Reviewers provided constructive advice for improvement prior to conducting the pilot study. As a result of this advice, the survey was shortened and the number of constructs reduced to four.

### Pilot study

Thirty five Likert type statements were generated from the four constructs with 11, 9, 9, 6 items, respectively. The four constructs were:

- 1) Teachers' beliefs regarding the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning and the resultant responsibilities of the regular classroom teacher.
- 2) Teachers' beliefs about resources required to run Individual Education Plans successfully in the regular classroom.
- 3) Teachers' perceptions of possible facilitators and barriers to the implementation of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.
- 4) Teachers' perceptions of their ability to use Individual Education Plans in a regular classroom for students experiencing difficulties with learning.

### Administering and collection of pilot surveys.

A sample of forty regular classroom teachers was chosen randomly from three regular metropolitan schools and one school on the Priority Schools Program. The principals from each school were approached and permission was requested for their staff to participate in the pilot survey. The questionnaires were delivered to each school and a brief explanation about the purpose of the pilot survey was given to staff, at a staff meeting. The questionnaires were left at the school for ten days, after which time they were collected from the school. Sixty five percent (26) of the surveys were completed and they provided some valuable information.

Reliability was determined using a coefficient alpha. A coefficient alpha was chosen, as each statement in the questionnaire was scored on a seven point scale. Coefficient alphas are used for "assessments that have more than one dichotomous, right-wrong scores" (Linn & Gronlund, 1995, p. 89.). The coefficient alpha measures the internal consistency of item scores.



Coefficient alpha estimates of reliability provide information about the degree to which the items in the questionnaire measure similar characteristics; that is, whether or not the items in a construct belong together. A large reliability coefficient is associated with small measurement errors and a small reliability coefficient is associated with large measurement errors (Linn & Gronlund, 1995).

Item discrimination values were also calculated for all items. Discrimination values below 0.3 suggested a weak correlation existed between item values and the totals of other items (Linn & Gronlund, 1995). Those items below 0.3 were considered for review, change or elimination from the questionnaire. Finally, constructs were tested for reliability when items with low item discriminations had been deleted from the questionnaire. However, this procedure can inflate the reliability estimate.

Overall, with all items included, reliability was fairly high for construct one, teachers' beliefs about the rights of students with specific learning difficulties ( $\alpha = .74$ ), for construct three, teachers' perceptions of possible facilitators and barriers to the implementation of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom ( $\alpha = .74$ ) and for construct four, teachers' perceptions of their own abilities to use Individual Education Plans in a regular classroom ( $\alpha = .72$ ). Construct two had a low reliability, teachers' beliefs about the resources required to run Individual Education Plans successfully in the regular classroom ( $\alpha = .56$ ). As a result of the findings each construct was viewed separately and each item examined for its correlation with other items. A number of the statements were reworded, and the few statements considered inappropriate to the study were deleted. The constructs were also reviewed and re-categorised as a result of the pilot study findings.

#### Construct one - Teachers' beliefs about the rights of students with specific learning difficulties.

The reliability of this construct with all items included was .74. However, the item discriminations on table 4.1 show that statements one, ten and eleven had a low correlations with the totals of other items in the construct ( $r = .11$ ,  $r = .04$  and  $r = .17$ , respectively).

Had each of these items been removed they would have increased the reliability of the construct to varying degrees, as shown in the item discrimination column on Table 4.1. Deleting statement one would have increased the reliability of construct one to .75. Statement ten would have produced the greatest increase in reliability of the construct to .766. The least important difference would have been seen had statement eleven been deleted from the instrument ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

Statement one had a low correlation (.11) with the total of the other items in construct one, suggesting it was inappropriate to the construct. This is indicated by the item discriminations in table 4.1. However, from a practical point of view the information to be gained was considered to be appropriate. Statement one may have provided greater item discrimination had it been placed in a different construct to the other statements in construct one. It was a general principle, regarding the educational needs of students experiencing difficulties with learning. Other statements in the construct provided more practical information pertaining to teaching students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom. As the information to be gained from statement one was considered of value to the overall study, it remained as part of the final study, however, it was included as a separate statement, not affiliated with a particular construct.

Statement ten was ambiguous with a number of different possible interpretations. Consequently, the statement was reworded to, "Students with a reading age two years below average can still be taught in the regular classroom", eliminating the term "same age peers" which may have been interpreted differently by various participants. Statement eleven remained the same.

**Construct two-Teachers' beliefs about resources required to run Individual Education Plans successfully in the regular classroom.**

The reliability of the construct as a whole was lower than any other construct ( $\alpha = .56$ ). Table 4.2 shows that statements 19 and 20 had low correlations with the totals of the other items in the construct ( $r = .12$  and  $r = .14$ , respectively).

Had either statement 19 or 20 been deleted from the construct, the reliability would have increased ( $\alpha = .59$  and  $\alpha = .59$ , respectively).

The concepts underlying both statements, team meetings and teaching strategies, were considered to be invalid. Firstly they were too multidimensional for the construct, reducing construct validity. Hence, they may not have given a meaningful measure of teachers' beliefs regarding available resources required to run Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom (Linn & Gronlund, 1995). Secondly, the statements appeared to lack content validity, in that they may have misrepresented the domain (Linn & Gronlund, 1995) of resources. Statements 18 and 19 were deleted based on the lack of validity regarding the anticipated information to be gained by retaining them. Finally, statements 16 and 17 were deleted. The statements required teachers to accurately assess the needs of their colleagues, a task considered to be unreliable.

**Table 4.1-Pilot study**

**Item discriminations and coefficient alphas for responses to statements about teachers' beliefs about the rights of students with specific learning difficulties and the responsibilities of the teacher.**

<b><u>Statements</u></b>	<b><u>item discrimination.</u></b> <b>(r)</b>	<b><u>Alpha with</u></b> <b><u>item removed</u></b> <b>(<math>\alpha</math>)</b>
1. Students with SLD should be taught in accordance with their educational needs.	0.105	0.750
2. Students with SLD have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.	0.767	0.651
3. Students with SLD have a right to be taught with other children of the same age.	0.612	0.690
4. As a teacher I believe it is my responsibility to cater for students with SLD in the regular classroom.	0.476	0.710
5. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using the general classroom program.	0.355	0.729
6. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using mixed ability groupings.	0.248	0.741
7. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using IEPs.	0.683	0.677
8. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using streamed ability groupings.	0.233	0.742
9. Hyperactive students can be taught in the regular classroom.	0.464	0.711
10. Students with a reading age two years below average can still be taught in the regular classroom.	0.041	0.765
11. Students with an IQ between 65 and 85 can be taught in the regular classroom if provided with an IEP.	0.166	0.745

Table 4.2-Pilot study

**Item discriminations and coefficient alphas for responses to statements regarding teachers' beliefs about resources required to run Individual Education Plans successfully in the regular classroom.**

<u>Statements</u>	<u>item discrimination (r.)</u>	<u>alpha coefficient (α)</u>
12. It is possible to run a general program and IEPs simultaneously.	0.186	0.561
13. IEPs allow regular classroom teachers to cater for the individual educational needs of students with SLD.	0.429	0.484
14. IEPs reduce the time needed to plan instruction for students with SLD.	0.387	0.499
15. A student's IEP should make their transfer to other schools easier.	0.371	0.504
16. A regular classroom teacher does not require extra management skills to implement IEPs for students with SLD.	0.425	0.488
17. A regular classroom teacher does not require extra management skills to develop IEPs for students with SLD.	0.273	0.547
18. To cater effectively for the needs of students with SLD in the regular classroom, teachers need to organise team meetings involving the teacher, parents and specialist advisers.	0.146	0.564
19. In practice, a team approach (involving teacher, student, parents and specialist advisers) may generate professional differences which will slow the planning process of IEPs for students with SLD.	0.119	0.586
20. Students on IEPs require the same teaching strategies as other students in the regular classroom.	0.141	0.586

**Construct three-Teachers' perceptions of possible facilitators and barriers to the implementation of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.**

The reliability of this construct with all items included was .70. Table 4.3 shows that all of the items correlated positively with the totals of other items in the construct. However, this is where most changes took place.

It was necessary to eliminate statements 21 to 24 for the final instrument. The eliminations were based on an assumption, resulting from the pilot study, that appeared to be underlying the statements. The assumption was, that an individual can correctly assume the skills and abilities of anonymous others, giving accurate responses regarding the beliefs and abilities on a population of teachers not known to the respondent. This assumption was considered inappropriate and resulted in a number of changes.

This assumption was consistent with many changes in the redevelopment of the final survey. The assumption resulted in statements 25 and 26 being reworded, from assuming the abilities and skills of others to the participants perception of their own abilities and skills. The statements were modified to, "I am aware of how to utilise available resources to cater effectively for students with SLD," and "I have the skills to train assistants to help run IEPs," in an attempt to increase the reliability of the final survey by responding on a personal level, rather than making assumptions regarding the skills and abilities of unknown others.

Table 4.3-Pilot study

Item discriminations and coefficient alphas for responses to statements regarding teachers' perceptions of possible facilitators and barriers to the implementation of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.

<u>Statements</u>	<u>item discrimination (r)</u>	<u>alpha coefficient (α)</u>
21. Most regular classroom teachers have the skills to assess the educational needs of students with SLD.	0.251	0.706
22. Most regular classroom teachers have the skills to design IEPs for students with SLD.	0.540	0.637
23. Most regular classroom teachers have the ability to implement IEPs for students with SLD.	0.421	0.670
24. Adequate support services and resources are available to help teachers cater effectively for students with SLD.	0.382	0.677
25. Most regular classroom teachers are unaware of how to utilise available resources to cater effectively for students with SLD.	0.316	0.692
26. Regular classroom teachers have the skills to train assistants to help run IEPs.	0.600	0.637
27. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will reduce the amount of time teachers have for other students in the regular classroom.	0.228	0.706
28. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will adversely affect the academic performance of other students in the regular classroom.	0.416	0.668
29. To implement IEPs effectively I will have to train the more able students in the classroom to work more independently.	0.395	0.682

Construct four-Teachers' perceptions of their ability to use Individual Education Plans in a regular classroom for students experiencing difficulties with learning.

This construct elicited a reliability of .72 with all items included. Table 4.4 shows that there was only one statement, statement 30, which demonstrated a low correlation with the total on the other items ( $r = .17$ ). Had this statement been deleted it would have increased the reliability to .78.

Statements 33 and 34 were considered too ambiguous, with the potential for misinterpretation by respondents and were thus deleted. Finally, statement 33 was considered to be worded too similarly to statement 32, leaving room for possible misinterpretation by respondents and was thus deleted from the final instrument.

#### Table 4.4-Pilot study

Item discriminations and coefficient alphas for responses to statements regarding teachers' perceptions of their ability to use Individual Education Plans in a regular classroom for students experiencing difficulties with learning.

<u>Statements</u>	<u>item discrimination (r)</u>	<u>alpha coefficient (<math>\alpha</math>)</u>
30. I have the necessary skills to recognise students with SLD.	0.170	0.780
31. I have the necessary skills to assess the educational needs of students with SLD.	0.560	0.670
32. I have the necessary skills to design IEPs for students with SLD.	0.680	0.630
33. I have the necessary skills to implement IEPs for students with SLD.	0.420	0.710
34. I do not require extra management skills to develop IEPs for students with SLD.	0.610	0.660
35. I do not require extra management skills to implement IEPs for students with SLD.	0.500	0.680

#### Conclusion.

The pilot study provided the opportunity to uncover problems with the construction of the constructs in the survey. Each construct was too broad, proving to be a topic rather than a construct, which in its nature is unidimensional. As a result of this, the final instrument was reorganised according to constructs and separate statements. There were three constructs which included six or seven items each and six separate statements.



The separate statements did not fit into any particular construct, however, the information that they could potentially provide was considered beneficial to the study and thus they were maintained. As it was not possible to determine the reliability of the single statements from a single administration, the results for these items may need to be treated more cautiously than the results gained from statements within a construct which may be assessed for reliability.

Other changes to the survey, specifically items 21 to 26, were made based on the assumption that it is not possible to accurately presuppose the abilities and skills of the majority, that is, the abilities and skills of most regular classroom teachers. Maintaining the original statements would require the consideration of too many extraneous variables, resulting in unreliable responses. A construct was created specifically seeking information regarding teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom as a result of the above mentioned assumption.

### Post pilot changes

#### Final Instrument.

Based on the pilot study a number of changes were made in the development of the final instrument. The most important change was the re-categorising of the statements under more appropriate constructs and the maintenance of seven separate statements. Five statements were eliminated and two added. In the final instrument there were twenty six Likert type statements.

#### Constructs.

The final instrument contained three constructs. The three constructs derived from the literature and the pilot study process were:

- i) Teachers' perceptions of the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom;
- ii) Teachers' perceptions of the effects of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom;

**iii) Teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom.**

**Rationale.**

The rationale behind changing the constructs was to provide information which would allow more reliable generalisations to be drawn from the results of the final survey. It was found that the constructs from the pilot study were not succinct enough and resulted in other variables affecting the interpretation. In order to attempt to alleviate this problem, constructs considered to be more unidimensional were created.

**Statements.**

The final instrument contained twenty six statements. Six of the statements did not fit within any of the three constructs and were included as single statements unaffiliated to a particular construct. The potential information to be gained from the responses to these statements was considered beneficial to the results of the study as they dealt with teachers' strategies for teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning, and teachers' perceived requirements for the implementation of Individual Education Plans. Had these statements been retained within any of the constructs they may have resulted in a reduction in the reliability. The single statements were:

- 1) Students with specific learning difficulties should be taught in the regular classroom using the general classroom program;
- 2) Students with specific learning difficulties should be taught in the regular classroom using mixed ability groups;
- 3) Students with specific learning difficulties should be taught in the regular classroom using streamed ability groups.

These three statements dealt with strategies to be used in the regular classroom for students with specific learning difficulties.

However, because they required teachers to consider their perceptions of a variety of strategies, each of which are different both in their design and implementation, they could not be grouped together within one construct. The final three statements were not related to any other statements or to each other:

- 4) Students with specific learning difficulties require the same teaching strategies as other students in the regular classroom;
- 5) Adequate support services and resources are available to help me cater for students with specific learning difficulties;
- 6) For Individual Education Plans to be successful it will be necessary to reduce class sizes.

### Final Study

#### Sample.

A sample of 300 regular metropolitan classroom teachers was randomly selected. 145 responses were received, marginally below the minimal 50 percent return rate expected for mail surveys (Deschamp & Tagnolini, 1988). Nine and a half percent of the sample were from schools on the Priority Support Program (PSP). 75 percent of respondents were female. This is similar to the actual percentage of female teachers in metropolitan government primary schools. Of the 5 489 teachers in this category, 4 134 (75.31%) of these were female, while 1 355 (24.69%) were male (R. Cook, 1995, Personal Conversation). Ten percent of the responses were from PSP teachers, which is a lower percentage than the number of schools in the metropolitan area which fall into that category. Sixty four of the 308 metropolitan government schools (20%) are PSP schools. Therefore, the survey can less confidently generalise the findings for school type in this survey to the general population, which are regular classroom teachers at regular or PSP schools.

### Reliability.

Coefficient alphas were calculated for each construct in order to measure the internal consistency of the item scores. This should provide information about the degree to which the items in the questionnaire measure similar characteristics and whether or not items in the construct belong together (Linn & Gronlund, 1995). Item discriminations were also calculated for all items within a construct. The single statements could not be analysed for reliability or item discrimination as they did not belong within a particular construct. The results of the responses to the single statements had to be viewed in isolation from any other statements.

Construct one, teachers' perceptions of the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom, had a reliability of .79. Construct two, teachers' perceptions of the effects of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom, showed a reliability of .73. The reliability for construct three, teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties, was .60.

### Construct one-Teachers' perceptions of the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom.

The overall reliability of construct one, with all items included, was .79. Table 4.5 shows that the majority of responses to the items in the construct tended to demonstrate uncertainty, due to the mid-scale responses tending toward 4 on the seven point scale. Respondents indicated agreement with statement one ( $\bar{X} = 6.007$ ) that students with specific learning difficulties should be taught in accordance with their educational needs. However, the low item discrimination of this statement with the totals of other items in the construct suggest that this item does not belong within the construct, as was suggested by the results of the pilot study. The low item discrimination may be a result of the extreme mean score of this statement, six on the seven point scale, compared to the lower scores of all other statements within the construct.

Statement one reduced the reliability because of the unusually high frequency of agreement ( $\bar{X} = 6.007$ ) with the statement in comparison with other statements in the construct (overall  $\bar{X} = 4.48$ ). Furthermore, the mean scores for statements 9 ( $\bar{X} = 3.910$ ) and 10 ( $\bar{X} = 4.566$ ), regarding teaching students with hyperactivity and reading ages two years below average, suggested that the majority of classroom teachers did not feel that such students should be taught in the regular classroom.

Table 4.5

Item discriminations for statements regarding teachers' perceptions of the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom.

<u>Statements</u>	<u>Mean</u> <u>(<math>\bar{X}</math>)</u>	<u>item</u> <u>discrimination</u> <u>(<math>r</math>)</u>
1. Students with SLD should be taught in accordance with their educational needs.	6.007	0.053
2. Students with SLD have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.	4.366	0.787
3. Students with SLD have a right to be taught with other students of the same age.	4.801	0.672
4. As a teacher it is my responsibility to cater for students with SLD in the regular classroom.	4.056	0.656
9. Hyperactive students have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.	3.910	0.550
10. Students with a reading age two years below average have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.	4.566	0.406
11. Students with an IQ between 65 and 85 have a right to be taught in the regular classroom if provided with an IEP.	3.640	0.545

Construct two-Teachers' perceptions of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.

The overall reliability of construct two, with all items included was .73. The mean scores on table 4.6 show that the majority of responses to the items in construct two were negative ( $\bar{X} = 3.82$ ), that is a score of four or below on the seven point scale.

It may be assumed that teachers generally did not feel that Individual Education Plans would be valuable in the regular classroom. Responses to item 14, which had the lowest correlation with the totals of other items ( $r = 0.257$ ), suggest that it teachers tended to disagree that Individual Education Plans would reduce teachers' planning time ( $\bar{X} = 3.715$ ). Had the item been excluded from the construct the reliability would have increased marginally to .77.

Table 4.6

Item discriminations for statements regarding teachers' perceptions of the effects of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.

<u>Statements</u>	<u>Mean</u> <u>(<math>\bar{X}</math>)</u>	<u>item</u> <u>discrimination</u> <u>(r)</u>
8. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using IEPs.	3.669	0.288
12. It is possible to run a general program and IEPs simultaneously.	3.761	0.615
13. IEPs allow regular classroom teachers to cater for the individual educational needs of students with SLD.	4.600	0.592
14. IEPs reduce the time needed to plan instruction for students with SLD.	3.715	0.257
15. A student's IEP should make their transfer to other schools easier.	4.764	0.455
19. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will reduce the amount of time teachers have for other students in the regular classroom.	2.340	0.480
20. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will adversely affect the academic performance of other students in the regular classroom.	3.715	0.555

Construct three-Teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom.

The overall reliability for construct three, with all items included was .60. The mean scores on table 4.7 show that the majority of teachers tended to feel that their skills and abilities to implement Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom were slightly lacking ( $\bar{X} = 3.62$ ).

The lack of consistency in the item discriminations on table 4.7 suggests that all items within the construct may not have belonged together.

Table 4.7

Item discriminations for responses to statements regarding teachers perceptions of their own skills and abilities.

<u>Statements</u>	<u>Mean</u> <u>(<math>\bar{X}</math>)</u>	<u>item</u> <u>discrimination</u> <u>(r)</u>
21. I have the skills to assess the educational needs of students with SLD.	4.085	-0.100
22. I have the skills to design IEPs for students with SLD.	5.476	-0.073
23. I have the skills to implement IEPs for students with SLD.	2.566	0.565
24. I am aware of how to utilise the available resources to effectively cater for students with SLD.	2.713	0.553
25. I have the skills to train assistants to help run IEPs.	3.486	0.575
26. I have the necessary skills to recognise students with SLD.	3.378	0.607

## CHAPTER FIVE :

### Results

A summary of the main results reveals that on the whole teachers believe that students experiencing difficulties with learning have a right to be taught according to their educational needs, with other students of the same age. Furthermore, they tended to believe it was their responsibility to cater for their educational needs and felt Individual Education Plans would enable them to do this. However, teachers tended to feel that the practical implementation of Individual Education Plans might prove too time consuming and result in adversely affecting the academic performance of other students in the classroom. This may have been due to a lack in teacher confidence in their skills to recognise students with specific learning difficulties. In order to make Individual Education Plans more practical teachers tended to agree that classroom sizes would need to be reduced.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of primary school teachers in Western Australia towards Individual Education Plans. This chapter looks at the findings of the investigation. The chapter has been divided into a number of sections. The sections are: procedures used in the analysis; the demographic break up of the sample; and, results according to the constructs. Within the various construct sections general information and differences between items are provided. The general findings for each construct came from the reliability and item analysis. The reliability refers to the consistency of assessment results and the item analysis helps to determine how well the items fit together within the construct (Linn and Gronlund, 1995). An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. Procedures used for the analysis of the results provided information about the attitudes of Western Australian teachers in general towards particular aspects of Individual Education Plans (constructs). The procedures included the descriptive statistics (including mean, standard deviation and number of entries), reliability, item analysis, and frequency.



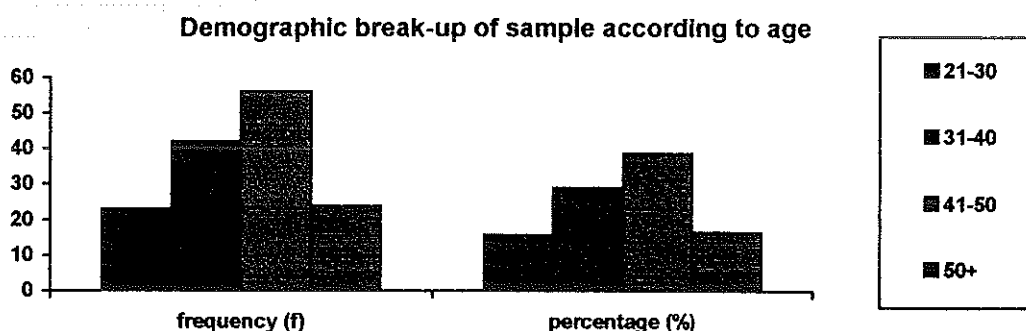
## Demographic characteristics

A number of variables may affect teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans and students with specific learning difficulties. The variables chosen for this study were, school type, sex, age, special education provisions at teachers school, year being taught, practical teaching experience, qualifications, confidence as a result of special education training and general teacher training, undergraduate training in special education, and previous success with students with specific learning difficulties. The demographic break-up of the variables is shown on figures 5.1 to 5.9.

### Age.

The variable regarding age required participants to tick one of four boxes. The boxes were representative of particular age groups. Group one was 21 to 30 years old; group two, was 31 to 40 years old; group three, was 41 to 50 years old; and group four, was the 50 + age group. The majority of participants were aged between 41 and 50 (38.62%), followed by the 31 to 40 age group (28.97%), then the 50 + age group (16.55%), and finally, the 21 to 30 age group (15.86%).

Figure 5.1

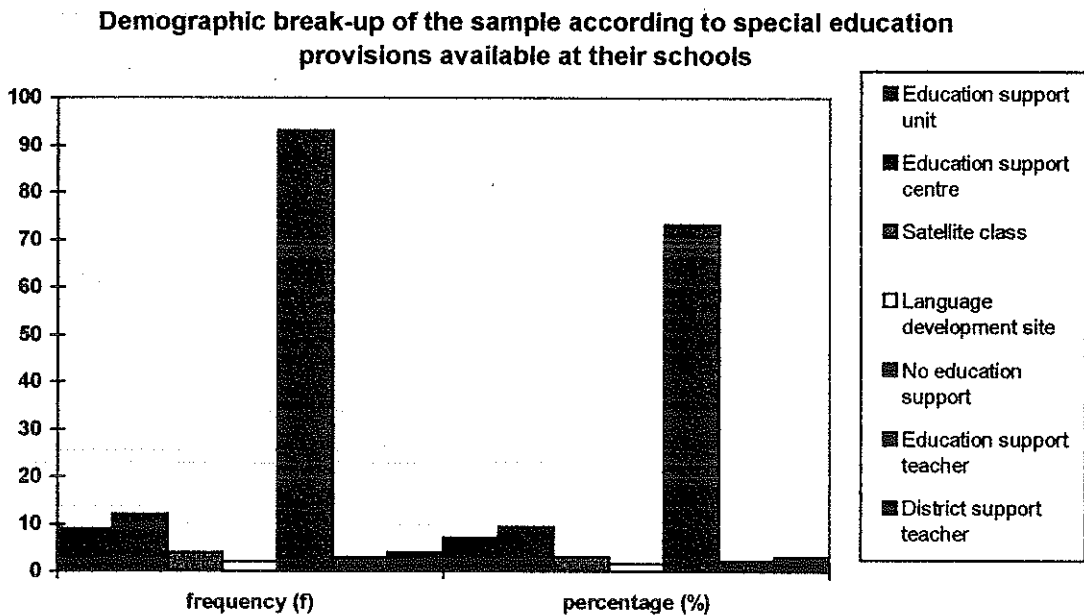


### Special Education provisions.

The variable regarding special education provisions required teachers to select one of five responses. The responses were to the statement beginning with the words "The school at which I am employed has....". Teachers were expected to choose one of the following responses:

One, "An education support unit"; two, "an education support centre"; three, " a satellite class"; four, " a language development site"; five, "no support for students with SLD"; six, "support teacher"; and, seven "district support class". The majority of respondents did not have support for students experiencing difficulties with learning, at their schools (73.23%), followed by a substantially reduced percentage of participants, who had an Education Support Centre, in their school (9.45%).

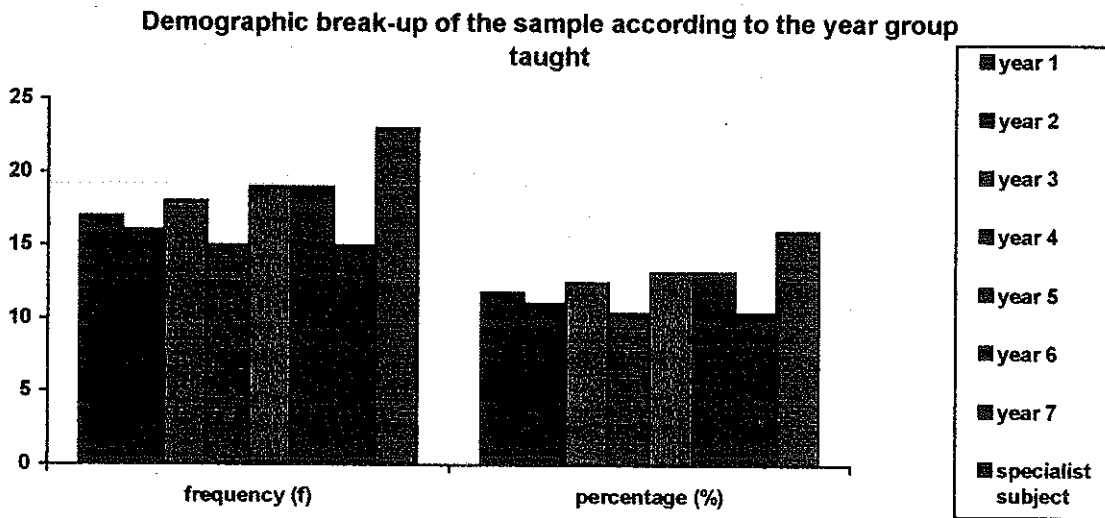
Figure 5.2



Year taught.

The variable year required teachers to record the year group in which they were teaching at the time of participation in the study. If teachers taught a specialist subject, and therefore taught all primary year levels, they were assigned to the specialist subject group. The largest group was the specialist subject group (15.97%), followed by year five and six teachers (13.19%). The smallest group were year four and seven teachers (10.42%), however, the difference in group size according to year level taught was minimal.

Figure 5.3

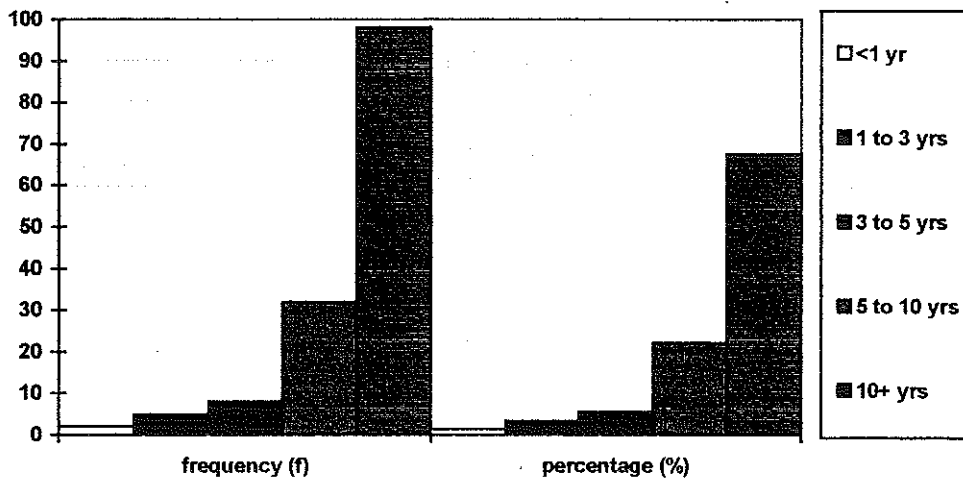


Experience.

The experience variable required teachers to state the amount of experience, in practical teaching, they would have at the end of 1996. They had five groups from which to choose. Group one, less than one year; group two, one to three years; group three, three to five years; group four, five to ten years; and, group five, ten or more years. The majority of the sample had over ten years practical teaching experience (67.59%). The smallest group consisted of teachers with less than one year of practical teaching experience (1.38%).

Figure 5.4

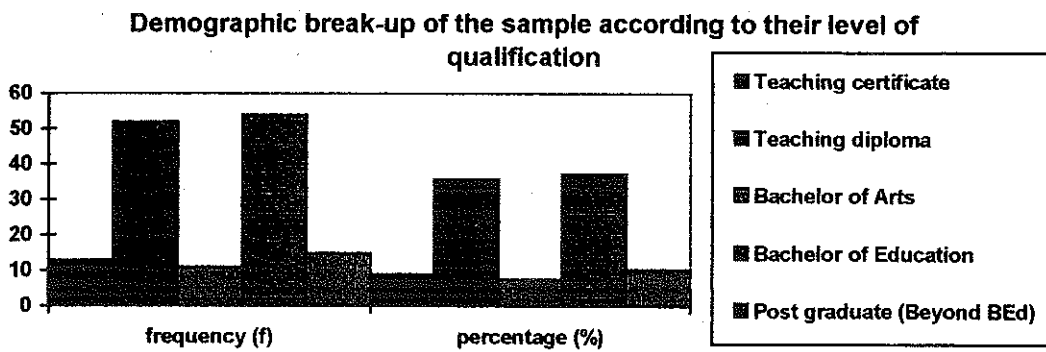
demographic break-up of the sample according to their amount of practical teaching experience



Qualifications.

The variable identifying levels of educational qualification required teachers to select one of five groups. Group one, teaching certificate; group two, teaching diploma; group three, Bachelor of Arts (Education); group four, Bachelor of Education; and group five, post graduate (beyond Bachelor of Education). The largest group consisted of teachers with a Bachelor of Education (37.24%) followed closely by those with a teaching diploma (35.9%). The smallest group consisted of teachers with a Bachelor of Arts (7.59%) followed by teachers with a teaching certificate (8.97%).

Figure 5.5

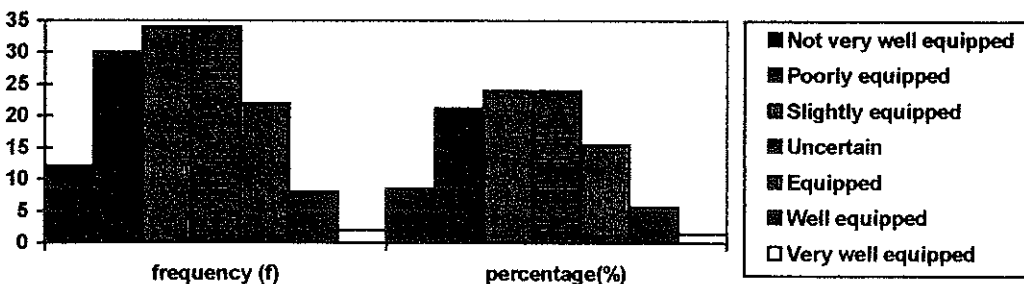


General teacher training.

The general training variable required teachers to indicate, on a seven point scale, how well equipped they felt they were to cater for students with SLD, as a result of their initial general teacher training. Teachers could choose to respond from not very well equipped (1) to very well equipped (7) on the seven point scale. Teachers felt either slightly equipped (23.94%) or uncertain (23.94%) about their ability to cater for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom as a result of their general teacher training. The smallest group of teachers consisted of those who felt very well equipped to cater for students experiencing difficulties with learning as a result of their general teacher training (1.41%).

Figure 5.6

**Demographic break-up of the sample according to how well equipped teachers feel they are to cater for students with specific learning difficulties as a result of their general teacher training**

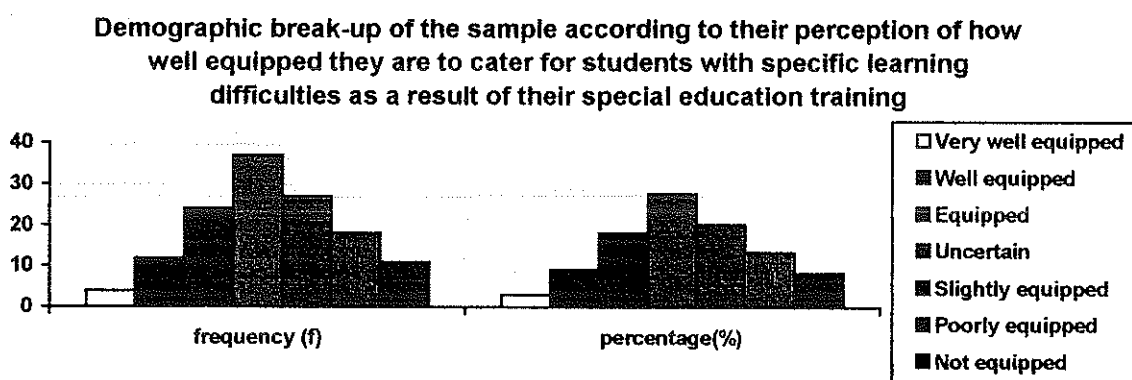


Special education training and confidence.

In the variable that dealt with teachers' confidence, teachers were expected to respond to the question, "How well do you feel you are equipped to cater for students with SLD as a result of your training in special education?" They were required to plot their answers on a seven point scale. The scale ranged from very well (1) to not very well (7). The majority of teachers were uncertain about their ability to cater for students with specific learning difficulties as a result of their special education training (27.82%), followed by teachers who felt slightly equipped (20.30%).

Teachers who felt very well equipped to cater for students with specific learning difficulties as a result of their special education training, were in a minority group (3.01%) followed by teachers who felt they were not equipped (8.27%).

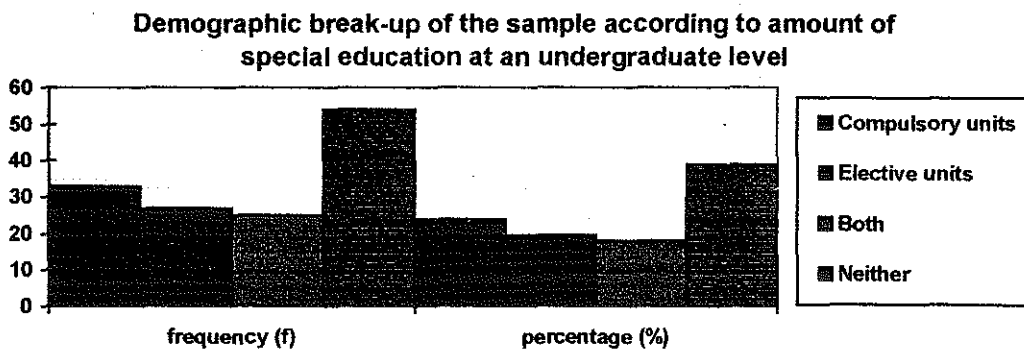
Figure 5.7



### Special education training.

The variable regarding teachers level of training in special education, required teachers to answer one of four responses. This variable was directed at the level of undergraduate training in special education. The possible responses were: one, compulsory unit/s; two, elective unit/s; three, compulsory and elective units; and four, neither. The largest group consisted of teachers with no undergraduate training in special education (38.85%). While, the smallest group consisted of teachers with both compulsory and elective units at an undergraduate level in special education (17.99%).

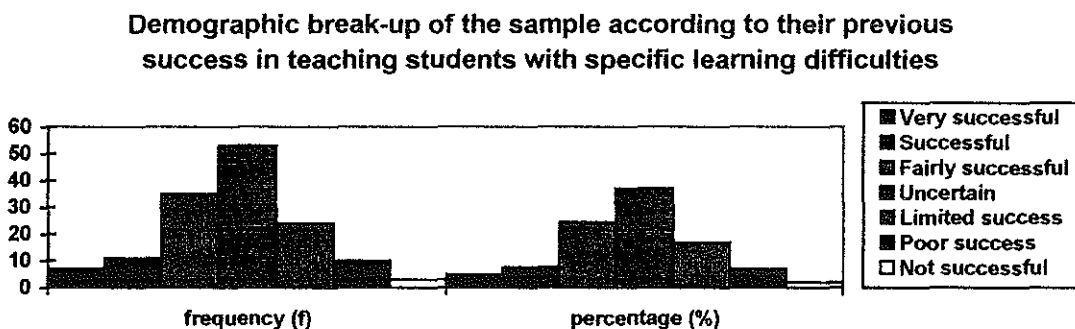
Figure 5.8



Previous success in teaching students with specific learning difficulties.

The variable regarding teachers' previous success in teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning, required teachers to rate their success on a seven point scale. The scale ranged from very successful (1) to not successful at all (7). The majority of the sample were uncertain about how successful they had been with students with specific learning difficulties in the past (37.06%). Whereas, both teachers who felt that they had been very successful (4.90%) and those who felt they had not been successful (2.10%) in teaching students with specific learning difficulties in the past were a minority.

Figure 5.9



Construct one-Teachers' perceptions of students rights

## General findings

The purpose of construct one was to find out what teachers' perceived the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom to be. The overall reliability of the construct, with all items included, was 0.79. As a whole, teachers tended to be positive ( $\bar{X} = 4.48$ ), (the mean of teachers' responses on a seven point scale, with 1 being the lowest and 7 being the highest on the construct), about the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom. When each of the items within the construct were looked at independently the levels of agreement and disagreement varied from negative to positive responses.

Table 5.1 provides the number of entries, means, standard deviations and item discriminations for each item within the construct. The table presents negative and positive responses from the sample of regular classroom teachers, as a whole. On average, statements that tended to elicit negative responses were statements 9 ( $\bar{X} = 3.91$ ) and 11 ( $\bar{X} = 3.64$ ). Statement 9 stated that "Hyperactive students have a right to be taught in the regular classroom", and statement 11 stated that "Students with an Intelligence Quotient between 65 and 85 have a right to be taught in the regular classroom if provided with an Individual Education Plan. Statement 1 elicited a positive response ( $\bar{X} = 6.007$ ) from the overall sample. All teachers felt positively about students being taught according to their individual educational needs.

All other responses to statements regarding the rights of students tended to be positive, ranging from a mean score of 4.06 for statement 4 to a mean score of 4.8 for statement 3. These mean scores show that on the whole teachers believe that students experiencing difficulties with learning have a right to be taught with other students of the same age. Furthermore, they appeared to believe that it is their responsibility to cater for such students in the regular classroom.



Table 5.1

**Construct one-Descriptive statistics for responses to items regarding teachers' perception of the rights of students**

<u>Statements</u>	<u>sample</u> <u>(n)</u>	<u>Mean</u> <u>(<math>\bar{X}</math>)</u>	<u>standard</u> <u>deviation</u> <u>(SD)</u>	<u>Item</u> <u>discrimination</u> <u>(r)</u>
1. Students with SLD should be taught in accordance with their educational needs.	144	6.007	1.470	0.053
2. Students with SLD have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.	142	4.366	1.682	0.787
3. Students with SLD have a right to be taught with other students of the same age.	141	4.801	1.546	0.672
4. As a teacher it is my responsibility to cater for students with SLD in the regular classroom.	142	4.056	1.778	0.656
9. Hyperactive students have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.	145	3.910	1.641	0.550
10. Students with a reading age two years below average have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.	145	4.566	1.466	0.406
11. Students with an IQ between 65 and 85 have a right to be taught in the regular classroom if provided with an IEP.	139	3.640	1.504	0.545

**Construct two-Teachers' perceptions of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom**

**General findings**

The purpose of construct two was to find out what teachers' perceived the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom to be. The overall reliability of the construct was 0.73. On the whole, teachers tended to be slightly negative ( $\bar{X}$  = 3.82) about the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.

When each of the items within the construct was looked at independently the levels of agreement and disagreement varied from negative to positive responses.

Table 5.2 provides the number of entries, means, standard deviations and item discriminations for each item within the construct. The table presents negative and positive responses from the sample of regular classroom teachers, as a whole.

The statement that tended to elicit the most negative response in this construct was statement 19 ( $\bar{X}=2.34$ ) which was reversed scored. Statement 19 read that

"Implementing Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties will reduce the amount of time teachers have for other students in their classroom".

Statement 13 elicited a positive response ( $\bar{X}=4.6$ ) from the overall sample, as did statement 15 ( $\bar{X}=4.76$ ). The majority of teachers appeared to feel that Individual Education Plans enabled teachers to cater for the individual needs of students with specific learning difficulties, as well as making transfers to new schools easier for such children.

All other responses to statements regarding teachers perceptions of the value of Individual Education Plans tended to be negative, with a limited range from a mean score of 3.72 for statements 14 and 20 to a mean score of 3.76 for statement 12. These mean scores show that the majority of teachers appear to believe that it is not possible to run Individual Education Plans and the general program simultaneously, that Individual Education Plans do little to reduce time needed to plan instruction for students with specific learning difficulties and furthermore, that they adversely affect the academic performance of other students in the classroom.

Table 5.2

**Construct two-Descriptive statistics for responses to items regarding teachers' perception of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.**

<u>Statements</u>	<u>sample</u> <u>(n)</u>	<u>Mean</u> <u>(<math>\bar{X}</math>)</u>	<u>Standard</u> <u>deviation</u> <u>(SD)</u>	<u>Item</u> <u>Discrimination</u> <u>(r)</u>
8. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using IEPs.	142	3.669	1.674	0.288
12. It is possible to run a general classroom program and IEPs simultaneously.	142	3.761	1.606	0.615
13. IEPs allow the regular classroom teacher to cater for the individual educational needs of students with SLD.	145	4.6	1.483	0.592
14. IEPs reduce the amount of time needed to plan instruction for students with SLD.	144	3.715	1.602	0.257
15. A student's IEP should make their transfer to other schools easier.	144	4.764	1.316	0.455
*19. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will reduce the amount of time teachers have for other students in the classroom.	144	2.340	1.429	0.480
*20. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will adversely affect the academic performance of other students in the regular classroom.	144	3.715	1.780	0.555

**Key:** \* = reverse scored item.

## Construct three-Teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans

### General findings

The aim of construct three was to find out how teachers perceived their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom. The overall reliability for the construct, with all items included was 0.60. On the whole, teachers tended to be slightly negative ( $\bar{X}=3.62$ ) about their own skills and abilities for implementing Individual Education Plans. When each of the items within the construct were looked at independently, the levels of agreement and disagreement varied from negative to positive responses.

Table 5.3 provides the number of entries, means, standard deviations and item discriminations for each item within the construct. Had statement 21 "I have the skills to assess the educational needs of students with SLD," been excluded, the construct reliability would have increased, with an alpha coefficient of 0.71 (as opposed to 0.60).

The table presents negative and positive responses from the sample of regular classroom teachers, as a whole. The statement that tended to elicit the most negative response in this construct was statement 23 ( $\bar{X}=2.60$ ). Statement 23 read that, "I have the skills to implement IEPs for students with SLD." Statement 24 also elicited negative responses from regular classroom teachers ( $\bar{X}=2.71$ ). Statement 24 read that, "I am aware of how to utilise the available resources to effectively cater for students with SLD." The majority of teachers appeared to feel that they were not fully equipped to train assistants to help run Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom, as well as lacking confidence in their skills for recognising students with specific learning difficulties.

All other responses to statements regarding teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities tended to be positive. The majority of teachers responded positively to statement 22 ( $\bar{X}=5.48$ ) and 21 ( $\bar{X}=4.10$ ), suggesting that they felt confident of their skills to design Individual Education Plans for students with specific learning difficulties, having assessed their educational needs.

Table 5.3

**Construct three-Descriptive statistics for responses to items regarding teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities**

<u>Statements</u>	<u>Sample (n)</u>	<u>Mean (<math>\bar{X}</math>)</u>	<u>standard deviation (SD)</u>	<u>item discrimination (r)</u>
21. I have the skills to assess the educational needs of students with SLD.	142	4.085	1.509	-0.100
22. I have the skills to design IEPs for students with SLD.	145	5.476	1.365	-0.073
23. I have the skills to implement IEPs for students with SLD.	145	2.566	1.447	0.565
24. I am aware of how to utilise the available resources to effectively cater for students with SLD.	143	2.713	1.523	0.553
25. I have the skills to train assistants to help run IEPs.	144	3.486	1.634	0.575
26. I have the necessary skills to recognise students with SLD.	143	3.378	1.661	0.607

**Statements**

Table 5.4 provides the number of entries, means and standard deviations for each of the separate statements. The table presents responses from the sample of regular classroom teachers, as a whole. Statements that tended to elicit negative responses were statements 5 ( $\bar{X}=2.97$ ), 16 ( $\bar{X}=2.42$ ) and statement 18 ( $\bar{X}=3.23$ ). Statement 5 stated that "Students with specific learning difficulties should be taught in the regular classroom using the general classroom program", statement 18 stated that "Students on Individual Education Plans require the same teaching strategies as others in the regular classroom", and statement 16 stated that "Adequate support services and resources are available to help me ( the regular classroom teacher) cater for students with specific learning difficulties". Statement 17 elicited a positive response ( $\bar{X}=6.24$ ) from the overall sample. All teachers appeared to feel that in order for Individual Education Plans to be successful in the regular classroom it would be necessary to reduce current class sizes.

The responses to the other two statements also tended to be negative, with a mean score of 3.91 for statement 6 and a mean score of 4.02 for statement 7. These mean scores show that the majority of teachers tended to believe that mixed ability groupings and the use of a general classroom program were less valuable than streamed ability groupings for teaching students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom.

Table 5.4

Descriptive statistics for responses to separate statements

<u>Statements</u>	<u>sample</u> <u>(n)</u>	<u>Mean</u> <u>(<math>\bar{X}</math>)</u>	<u>Standard deviation</u> <u>(SD)</u>
5. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using the general classroom program.	143	2.965	1.650
6. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using mixed ability groups.	144	3.909	1.621
7. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using streamed ability groups.	139	4.022	1.725
16. Adequate support services and resources are available to help me cater for students with SLD.	144	2.423	1.436
17. For IEPs to be successful it will be necessary to reduce class sizes.	144	6.236	1.245
18. Students on IEPs require the same teaching strategies as other students in the regular classroom	142	3.225	1.630

## CHAPTER SIX:

### Discussion

The results of this study outlined a number of anxieties and apprehensions, held by Western Australian primary school teachers, concerning the design and implementation of Individual Education Plans. The results indicated a need for increased training in special education, special education experts on school campuses, reduced class sizes and increased time for developing and implementing Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.

The results suggest a difference in attitude between teachers' perceptions of the rights of students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom and their perceptions of the value of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom. Regular classroom teachers tend to view the rights of students with specific learning difficulties, to be taught in the regular classroom, positively, although they generally believed the value of Individual Education Plans for these students, in the regular classroom, to be negative. This conclusion is based on the overall mean score (4.48) for construct one which exhibited a high reliability, with an alpha coefficient of 0.79 and the overall mean score (3.8) for construct two which also exhibited a high reliability, with an alpha coefficient of 0.73.

The difference between teachers' attitudes towards the two constructs may be, in part, a result of the special education provisions at their school or general teacher training; and undergraduate training in special education.

#### Special education Provisions

The majority of teachers in the sample group (73.23%) did not have access to support for students experiencing difficulties with learning, at their schools. Furthermore, almost half of the teachers in the sample group (47.88%) felt either only slightly equipped or uncertain about their ability to cater for students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom as a result of their general teacher training. Only 1.42% of teachers felt they were very well equipped to cater for these students as a result of their general teacher training.



Facilities such as education support centre, satellite classes and language development sites, not only allow for limited time in the regular classroom, they also provide expertise on campus. Such expertise may aide and support potential problems within the regular classroom, thus, empowering teachers in the regular classroom.

#### General teacher training and undergraduate training in special education

The largest group within the sample (38.85%) had received no undergraduate training in special education during their general teacher training. As such a large percentage of teachers may feel that they have limited ability to plan for students with specific learning difficulties and may also feel apprehensive about using existing resources to cater for these students. Teachers with greater training in special education may be more confident and therefore more eager to cater to the needs of students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom.

#### Other findings

All teachers in the sample agreed with the general principle that students experiencing difficulties with learning have a right to be taught in accordance with their educational needs (mean=6.01). Moreover, some teachers followed through with this general principle, agreeing that Individual Education Plans would reduce planning time for the instruction of students experiencing difficulties with learning, at a practical level (Reverse Score mean=2.34). However, other teachers who were strongly supportive of the general principle, did not feel that Individual Education Plans would reduce time needed to plan instruction for students experiencing difficulties with learning. This suggests that although teachers may agree in principle with a statement, idea or recommendation, they may not be so willing to follow through on a practical level.

Nearly all respondents appeared to agree with three things. They all felt that adequate support services and resources were available to help them cater for students experiencing difficulties with learning. However, they also all tended to believe that the implementation of Individual Education Plans would produce one particular negative outcome.

The negative outcome was the reduction in teacher time for other students in the classroom (Reverse Score mean=2.34 (statement 19)). Moreover, teachers felt it was necessary to train more able students in the classroom to work independently, if they were required to cater to the needs of students experiencing difficulties with learning.

The latter findings come about as a result of the perceived lack of teacher time for other students. This perceived lack of time is expected to come about through the creation and implementation of Individual Education Plans.

## CHAPTER SEVEN :

### Conclusion

This study identified a number of anxieties and apprehensions which mainstream Western Australia primary school teachers have in regard to Individual Education Plans and students experiencing difficulties with learning. It also emphasised teachers' perceptions of the availability and adequacy of classroom support and resources for teachers of students experiencing difficulties with learning in mainstream Western Australia primary schools. Many of the findings about Western Australia primary school teachers' attitudes appear similar to those held by teachers in the United States.

The main research question, (What are the attitudes of primary school teachers in Western Australia towards the implementation of Individual Education Plans for students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom?), was answered through teachers' responses to the items in the questionnaire and is evident in teacher anxieties and apprehensions identified from the results. The main anxieties and apprehensions appeared to be due to training, special education provisions at the school, general training at an undergraduate level and experiences with students who experience difficulties with learning and Individual Education Plans. Previous studies in the United States, have discovered that teachers' expectations of students experiencing difficulties with learning are often low. These students also tend to be fitted into existing and inappropriate programs that may not address their specific needs (Coil, 1992).

On the surface, many teachers from the sample also appeared to have low or negative expectations of students experiencing difficulties with learning. However, further investigation showed that this may be possibly due to a lack of training in special education and as a consequence low levels of teacher confidence. This was indicated in the way teachers responded to the items in construct one which dealt with teachers' perceptions of the rights of students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom. Regular teachers, especially those with little success in teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning, did not feel these students were their responsibility. Other similarities between teachers from previous studies and primary teachers' responses, from this study, included, time, class size and lack of training.

Teachers from the sample in this study held views similar to those in the NSW NEED study (Bennett and others, 1994). Teachers in this study tended to agree in principle that students experiencing difficulties with learning should be taught in accordance with their educational needs. However, on a practical level teachers thought that Individual Education Plans would prove too time consuming. Many of their American counterparts felt that Individual Education Plans were time wasting. The time factor was followed with a call for reduced class sizes.

The findings indicate a need for an increased focus on special education in teacher training courses at undergraduate, post graduate, in-service and professional development levels. Soon Individual Education Plans will become commonplace in the regular classroom (Education Department of Western Australia, 1995) and the results of this investigation demonstrates a major lack in preparedness of the regular classroom teacher for this change. As such, a variety of courses need to be provided for teachers both to increase confidence through imparting knowledge and increasing knowledge through reinforcement.

Refresher courses need to be planned for the future to ensure continual support and retention of vital principles and components of Individual Education Plans. The refresher courses should address assessment of students experiencing difficulties with learning, as well as design and implementation of Individual Education Plans alongside a general classroom program. Furthermore, there appears to be a relationship existing between negative teacher attitudes toward Individual Education Plans and lack of knowledge about students experiencing difficulties with learning, Individual Plans and utilisation of resources. Lack of support of recommendation 16 (Shean, 1993) at a practical level has also been demonstrated, as a result of minimal contact with special education experts.

Training must include information about how to access resources and expert opinions when necessary. However, more importantly it should impart knowledge about assessing students experiencing difficulties with learning and include strategies and tools to cater for the needs of these students, once they have been identified.

Knowledge such as this will empower teachers, reducing anxiety and building confidence in teachers who have had little focus, in their training, on special education. Provisions such as education support centres, satellite classes and language development sites within schools, may reduce teacher anxiety and apprehensions regarding teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning.

On the whole more experienced teachers that had taught for long periods of time, using a particular repertoire of strategies, alongside a particular set of ideas, appeared to recognise how difficult a new task may be, such as the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans. On the other hand, it is often imagination, creativity and enthusiasm that helps less experienced teachers become quality experienced teachers (Barry and King, 1991) enabling them to cope with new tasks such as developing and implementing Individual Education Plans. Therefore, both the enthusiastic novice and the experienced teacher are able to implement Individual Education Plans alongside general programs, distributing their time equally, through using their imagination, creativity and enthusiasm effectively.

In order to address the needs of teachers in the 50+ age range it is necessary to emphasise the importance of their existing ideas, and teaching strategies. Therefore, the Learning Difficulties Program must use examples and explanations that demonstrate flexibility and the employment of a number of different ideas and teaching strategies. The strategies used are tools to reach an important end, that is, meeting the educational needs of students experiencing difficulties with learning. On the other hand, no matter how enthusiastic a teacher is, ignorance of the planning process and special education will undoubtedly reduce teacher confidence.

Professional development programs which cater to the varying mind-sets of teachers, need to be created if Individual Education Plans are to be successful. For instance, streamed training groups, according to the teacher's perceived need, will enable optimum learning for the individual teacher as well as ensuring effective use of funding. This type of set up will ultimately increase teachers' confidence regarding specific learning difficulties and planning and implementation of Individual Education Plans in the regular classroom.

### Differences between the study and previous findings.

I believe it is necessary for Education Department of Western Australia to provide support, training and funding. However, a small group of teachers appeared to have less understanding of the essence of an Individual Education Plan and as a result may require training in assessment of students experiencing difficulties with learning, design and implementation of Individual Education Plans. Individual Education Plans must be unique to the student and his or her specific educational needs and situation. Therefore, the development and implementation of Individual Education Plans must involve the regular classroom teacher.

Further research may involve a follow up study once the teachers who were surveyed in this study have received professional development training on students experiencing difficulties with learning and the design and implementation of Individual Education Plans. The follow up study could look at the change in teachers attitudes after professional development, compared to their attitudes prior to professional development. The Learning Difficulties Program may benefit from further research such as this, as it would allow them to gauge teachers' confidence and improved attitudes as a result of their professional development programs. Moreover, in future studies other possibilities may be explored. These possibilities have been stated as recommendations, below.

### Recommendation I.

This recommendation emphasises a teacher centred approach to developing and implementing Individual Education Plans. This may involve research into the effectiveness of: a) curriculum based assessment; and, b) design and implementation of Individual Education Plans utilising the teacher's preferred teaching style and strategies. This is not to say that this can not be achieved in collaboration with experts in the Education Department of Western Australia, however teacher input is vital. This should empower teachers, reducing the lack of confidence evident in the results.

### Recommendation II.

This recommendation deals with the creation of work groups among the staff. Teachers should work together providing input about students' specific learning difficulties, suggesting assessment tools and aiding one another in the planning and evaluation of the plan. For every small group of four to six teachers there should be a contact expert, who may be telephoned or met with to discuss problems. These experts will help with both administrative and practical problems regarding Individual Education Plans, however, the onus for the successful development and implementation of Individual Education Plans rests with the classroom teacher. The results showed that teachers tended to feel that adequate support was available. Networking with colleagues and input from experts should further increase support to classroom teachers, enhancing teacher confidence.

### Recommendation III.

This recommendation is for further research regarding teachers' attitudes towards Individual Education Plans and students experiencing difficulties with learning. The literature review reveals that limited research into teachers' attitudes to Individual Education Plans and student experiencing difficulties with learning has been carried out in Australia and that the majority of the literature is based on United States research. In order to determine the effectiveness of professional development programs in Western Australia, the Learning Difficulties Program should assess teachers' attitudes towards individual education plans and students experiencing difficulties with learning prior to professional development. Teachers should then be surveyed to determine teachers' attitudes after professional development. The comparison of attitudes before and after professional development will enable researchers to determine the effectiveness of professional development, based on changing attitudes.

These recommendations emphasise the empowerment of teachers. Knowledge about how to assess the educational needs of students experiencing difficulties with learning and the design and implementation of Individual Education Plans will increase teachers confidence, thus empowering them.

Furthermore, teachers may feel accountable for teaching students experiencing difficulties with learning if their assessments are relevant to their teaching curriculum and strategies. Supportive networks for planning Individual Education Plans on campus may also increase teachers' confidence, further empowering them to take responsibility for students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom. In order to enable these changes further research is necessary. Therefore, it may be beneficial to outline the limitations of this study, in order to avoid them or cater for them in future studies.

### Limitations of the study

There were four main limitations to the study. The limitations were, reliance on studies from the United States, limited literature was available from the Education Department of Western Australia addressing the Shean recommendations, the political situation at the time of the study, and personal biases based on previous experiences. The most important limitation appeared to be the lack of research in Australia regarding students experiencing difficulties with learning and Individual Education Plans. This required the researcher to extract perceived central principles and components of Individual Education Plans, and adapt them according to the changes taking place in Western Australia. The changes include professional development and policy changes being addressed by the learning difficulties program and project. Furthermore, minimal literature has been published regarding the work being carried out by the learning difficulties program or project. This required the researcher to rely upon personal conversations and utilise unpublished definitions and purposes of these groups. Had Australian literature been available comparisons between the United States and Western Australian education systems would not have been necessary.

At the time of the study, the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (SSTWA) strikes and conditions meant that union members were required to abstain from extra duties, such as overtime. This may have decreased the response rate due to a possible decrease in participation by many teachers who are members of the SSTWA.



The researcher endeavoured to address this limitation through expressing that the study was not affiliated with the Education Department of Western Australia.

Further research may alleviate the first two limitations. The limitations may be alleviated through research in Western Australia, providing literature pertinent to Western Australian schools from the Education Department of Western Australia. Thus, decreasing the need to extract concepts from studies carried out in and meant to contribute to the United States education system.

Finally, personal biases based on previous experiences with students with specific learning difficulties and Individual Education Plans may have affected the validity of the study. Due to the limited practical teaching experience prior to this study and when the research was carried out, a set of assumptions and beliefs should have been considered.

A number of assumptions may have influenced the research. The assumptions are:

1. All students have a right to an education that will allow them to experience success and realise their capabilities.
2. Parents have a valuable contribution to make about their child's education and regarding the provision of information about students experiencing difficulties with learning in the regular classroom. Therefore, they must be involved in programme development.
3. The existing policy of Devolution and the proposed mechanisms for support as well as the nature of the document, make the planning and implementation of Individual Education Plans a manageable task.
4. In Western Australia, teachers' concerns and anxieties toward Individual Education Plans will not be as great as in the United States as the same legal implications do not exist.
5. The quality of education will be greatly improved when "the central office of the Ministry of Education, as a matter of urgency, prepare policy and guidelines for the education of Students with specific learning difficulties" (Shean, 1993, recommendation 31).

These assumptions are based on a limited amount of contact with students with specific learning difficulties in the regular classroom. Contact with such students has been limited to four teaching practices, each of two weeks duration and a ten week assistant teaching programme (ATP).

## **APPENDICES**

- A. Written request to principal**
- B. Letter from supervisor to principal**
- C. Questionnaire and cover letter**

**APPENDIX A**

**Written request to Principal**

Ms Nicola Davis



Dear

I am writing with regard to our telephone conversation requesting permission for the staff at your school to participate in a short questionnaire. As a student enrolled in the BEd (honours) program, at Edith Cowan University, I am required to carry out a research study. In the area of Children with Special Needs I have chosen to investigate the attitudes of regular primary school teachers towards teaching children with Specific Learning Difficulties (SLD)\* in the regular classroom, using Individualised Education Plans (IEP)\*.

All staff are assured of confidentiality as the questionnaire does not require their name or the name of the school. Questionnaires will only be viewed by my supervisor and myself. I have enclosed the questionnaire for your perusal.

Assuming the questionnaire meets with your approval, I would greatly appreciate it if you would distribute a copy to all willing participants. Please inform staff that the questionnaire should take no more than ten (10) minutes and that it is not associated with the Education Department. I will collect all questionnaires during the week beginning Monday 7th August, from the reception at your school.

Should you have any further queries regarding the study please contact me on [REDACTED] Alternatively, you may wish to contact my supervisor Dr Ken Knibb on 370 6434 or Mr Les Puhl on 370 6241. I look forward to your responses and thank you for your time.

Yours Sincerely,  
Nicola Davis

Student (BEd - honours)  
Edith Cowan University

\*Definitions of these terms can be found on the first page of the questionnaire.

**APPENDIX B**

**Letter from supervisor**



EDITH COWAN  
UNIVERSITY

PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA  
MOUNT LAWLEY CAMPUS

2 Bradford Street, Mount Lawley  
Western Australia 6050  
Telephone (09) 370 6111  
Facsimile (09) 370 2910

28 August 1995

Dear Principal

Nicola Davis is a student at Edith Cowan University studying for the award Bachelor of Education (Honours). As part of her studies she is required to conduct a study and write a thesis based on the results from this study. Ms Davis is conducting a study that will investigate teacher attitudes towards Individual Education Plans or Collaborative Action Plans. This study has been approved by the Higher Degrees Committee at Edith Cowan University and has ethics approval.

I would like to thank your school in assisting Nicola with her study. If you have questions concerning this study which I could address I can be contacted at Edith Cowan University (370 6497).

Yours sincerely

David Evans PhD  
Lecturer in Education  
Coordinator, Children with Special Needs

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Questionnaire and cover letter**



# ABOUT THIS QUESTIONNAIRE

The items on this questionnaire have been designed to tap the attitudes of mainstream Western Australian primary school teachers about the development and implementation of Individualised Education Programs, for children with Specific Learning Difficulties, in the regular classroom. The items will also provide information about the factors that affect the formation of these attitudes.

NB - ALL INFORMATION WILL BE TREATED AS STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL AND WILL BE USED FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES ONLY.

## DEFINITIONS

The definitions provided below will ensure consistent interpretation of the items, across the sample:

### **Definition of Individualised Education Programs (IEPs)**

An education plan is a written record of joint decisions by parents and educational professionals regarding the needs and program for a student with a disability or Specific Learning Difficulty. The components of an individualised Education Programs are:

- a) A statement of the student's current level;
- b) A statement of annual goals;
- c) A statement of short term objectives, stated in behavioural terms;
- d) Documentation of special services and provision of education;
- e) A timeline, for initiating services and anticipated duration;
- f) Evaluation procedures using objective criteria.

(Polloway, E. & Patton, J., 1989, and Westwood, 1993).

### **Definition of Specific Learning Difficulties (SLDs)**

Specific Learning Difficulties "refers to those students whose achievement levels in mathematics and / or language (literacy) are significantly below specified benchmarks (specified by the relevant education authorities and subject to regular review). "  
(Shean, 1993. p19).

## SECTION 1

### General Information

1. What type of school do you teach at?  
(Tick the appropriate box)
- (1) Metropolitan  
 (2) Country  
 (3) PSP (Priority Schooling Program)  
 (4) PCAP (Priority Country Area Program)
2. What is your sex?
- (1) Female  
 (2) Male
3. What is your age?
- (1) Between 21 - 30  
 (2) Between 31 - 40  
 (3) Between 41 - 50  
 (4) 50 +
4. The school at which I am employed has
- (1) An Education Support unit  
 (2) An Education Support Centre  
 (3) A Satellite Class  
 (4) A Language Development Site  
 (5) No Support for children with SLD
5. Which Year are you teaching?
6. How many years of primary school teaching will you have completed at the end of this academic year?
- (1) <1  
 (2) 1-3  
 (3) 3-5  
 (4) 5-10  
 (5) >10



## SECTION TWO

1. Students with SLD should be taught in accordance with their educational needs.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

2. Students with SLD have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

3. Students with SLD have a right to be taught with other students of the same age.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

4. As a teacher it is my responsibility to cater for students with SLD in the regular classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

5. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using the general classroom program.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

6. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using mixed ability groups

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

7. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using streamed ability groups.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

8. Students with SLD should be taught in the regular classroom using IEPs.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

9. Hyperactive students have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree



**10. Students with a reading age two years below average have a right to be taught in the regular classroom.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**11. Students with an IQ between 65 and 85 have a right to be taught in the regular classroom if provided with an IEP.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**12. It is possible to run a general classroom program and IEPs simultaneously.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**13. IEPs allow the regular classroom teacher to cater for the individual educational needs of students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**14. IEPs reduce the amount of time needed to plan instruction for students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**15. A student's IEP should make their transfer to other schools easier.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**16. Adequate support services and resources are available to help me cater for students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**17. For IEPs to be successful it will be necessary to reduce class sizes.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**18. Students on IEPs require the same teaching strategies as other students in the regular classroom.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree



**19. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will reduce the amount of time teachers have for other students in the classroom.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**20. Implementing IEPs for students with SLD will adversely affect the academic performance of other students in the regular classroom.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**21. I have the skills to assess the educational needs of students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**22. I have the skills to design IEPs for students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**23. I have the skills to implement IEPs for students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**24. I am aware of how to utilise the available resources to effectively cater for students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**25. I have the skills to train assistants to help run IEPs.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

**26. I have the necessary skills to recognise students with SLD.**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7  
Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree