

**Inclusive School Leaders' Perceptions on the Implementation of Individual Education
Plans**

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Abstract

Given increases in student diversity in our schools and classrooms of which students with varying disabilities and additional needs form a part, school leaders have a greater responsibility of ensuring that all students irrespective of their developmental backgrounds benefit from quality education. One of the approaches school leaders use to make quality education accessible to students with disability and/or additional needs is through the adoption of IEPs to inform pedagogy. Although not a legal requirement in Australian schools, some school leaders have adopted IEPs for use by teachers in supporting students with disability and/or additional educational needs. This phenomenological study explores the roles and experiences of five primary and seven secondary school leaders from two independent schools in metropolitan Victoria who adopt and use IEPs in their schools in programming for quality inclusive education for students with disability and/or additional needs. Thematic analysis of the data indicated that IEPs are used by the school leaders as planning documents which provide a means of communicating students' learning needs. School leaders encouraged collaboration and consultation amongst colleagues when developing IEPs. Continuous professional learning was identified as key to the effective implementation of IEPs; yet, school leaders reported that there was no single best approach in acquiring professional development in utilising IEPs to educate students with disability and/or additional needs.

Key words: inclusive practices, Individual Education Plans, school leaders, student diversity

Introduction

Individual Education Plans (IEPs) which are mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the United States are being adopted worldwide in schools through various forms (Brown & Byrnes, 2014; Colgan, 2002; Mitchell, Morton, & Hornby, 2010). IEPs have never been a legal requirement for Australian schools to implement (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth [ARACY], 2013). Nonetheless, some school leaders in Australia have embraced the use of IEPs by teachers in supporting students with disability and/or additional needs. In Australia, the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards) outlines legal obligations for education under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) and stipulates that all schools are required to provide students with disability and/or additional needs with the opportunity to have an equitable education (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012a).

The review of the Standards in 2010 highlighted that the Australian Government in collaboration with state and territory education authorities were committed to investigating ways that fostered national consistency across jurisdictions in relation to the effective use of IEPs to assist students with disability to achieve their education goals (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2012b). Dempsey (2012) argued that until the problem of irregularities in IEP development is addressed, students with disability and/or additional needs will continue to be deprived of quality education and classroom teachers will be unable to achieve what is widely viewed as best practice. Government recommendations in the 2015 review of the Standards outlined that decisions regarding IEP development and the process of consultation remained with education providers and authorities (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2015a). Furthermore, the government including state, territory and non-government representatives in

schooling created a national resource to guide discussions on personalised learning with the student and key stakeholders (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2015b, 2015c). They agreed to work towards the full implementation of a nationally consistent collection of data on school students with disability (NCCD) by 2015 to provide information on the number of students in schools receiving different levels of adjustments and how these students are catered for based on their diverse learning needs (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2014, 2015b).

The rationale of our study was to explore the perceived roles and experiences of primary and secondary school leaders who adopt and use IEPs in their schools in programming for quality inclusive education for students with disability and/or additional needs. School leaders are tasked with greater responsibility and have a pivotal role in ensuring that all students irrespective of their developmental backgrounds benefit from quality inclusive practices. Research indicates that successful implementation of inclusive practice requires the support of school leaders (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014). Hence, in this paper we report on the following central question: How do school leaders experience the development and use of IEPs in programming for quality inclusive education for students with disability and/or additional needs?

Literature Review

It has been argued that all students should have “access to educational places of their choice as legitimate cultural, political, social and economic citizens” (Agbenyega, 2017, p. 13). However, in a classroom comprising of diverse learners some educators face the challenge in finding ways to cater for students with disability and/or additional needs. Some of these challenges include recording the relevant evidence of adjustments that are made for students and how to develop effective teaching programs to mitigate these challenges. In

view of this, school leaders are required to take necessary measures in ensuring that students with disability and/or additional needs receive an individualised learning map that defines a clear route for their achievement in learning. One of the approaches school leaders use to make quality education accessible to students with disability and/or additional needs is through the adoption and use of IEPs to inform pedagogy (Dempsey, 2012; Lee-Tarver, 2006; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011, 2014). The adoption and use of IEPs are underpinned by the philosophy that the needs of individual students are diverse and can be addressed within a general classroom (Lee-Tarver, 2006). How inclusive best practices are accomplished through the implementation and evaluation of authentically developed IEPs will have direct practical implications for teachers, school leaders, students, parents and the education system as a whole (Yell, Conroy, Katsiyannis, & Conroy, 2013). IEPs have been emphasised as a valuable inclusive practice and viewed as a helpful process for everyone (Shaddock, MacDonald, Hook, Giorcelli, & Arthur-Kelly, 2009).

Several studies conducted in the US, UK, Australia and New Zealand focused on the principles and design of IEPs. Included in these research papers are also identification of inconsistencies with IEP development, IEPs encompassing several functions, the lack of IEPs being implemented for particular students with disability, the challenges stakeholders encountered in the IEP process and more training was needed for teachers to effectively implement IEPs (Dempsey, 2012; Frankl, 2005; Lee-Tarver, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2010; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Thomson, Bachor, & Thomson, 2002). According to ARACY (2013, p. 5), Australian schools have implemented best practice approaches focussing on whole-school practices and in-class support with emphasis on quality teaching for all students through differentiating instruction, provisions of alternative curricula, application of universal design for learning strategies, use of technologies and individual planning through the IEP. However, they stated that there is a “lack of evidence-based data on the impact these

practices have had on changes in the learning outcomes for students with disability and/or additional needs” (ARACY, 2013, p. 5).

Individual planning does not mean that some students should be given inferior education rather schools have the responsibility to respond to each student’s unique characteristics with high expectations for enhanced achievement (DEEWR, 2012a). Furthermore, school leaders who are genuinely committed to the success of all students must be prepared to advocate for the educational rights of students with disability and/or additional needs and effectively collaborate with the school community to achieve this goal (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). School leaders need to ensure that there is a collaborative philosophy and commitment to improvements in the implementation of inclusive practices by delivering expert knowledge to teachers and making provisions of resources including organisational and structural support for teachers (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Frederickson, Dunsmuir, Lang, & Monsen, 2004).

Methodology

This qualitative study provided a solid foundation to capturing the perceived roles and experiences of primary and secondary school leaders who adopt and use IEPs in their schools in programming for quality inclusive education for students with disability and/or additional needs. The goal of our study was to understand the participants’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon in order to improve practices and develop deeper insight about the features of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Accordingly, a phenomenological approach was well suited in understanding the meaning school leaders accorded to the implementation of IEPs. The study entailed identifying a sample of participants, collecting open-ended data through focus groups, analysing emerging data and developing themes to

describe the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of participants about a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2014, p. 4; Moustakas, 1994).

In using purposeful sampling, school leaders with similar backgrounds and experiences who shared a depth of rich information about IEPs were selected (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 1990, 2015). We sent invitation emails with a copy of the explanatory statement and consent form to principals inviting school leaders to participate in the study. Principals from two non-government schools with primary and secondary sub-schools in the South-Eastern metropolitan region of Victoria positively responded to participate in the study. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from Monash University Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Research and Analysis Division.

School context

School 1 (S1) and School 2 (S2) are co-educational day schools offering classes from Kindergarten through to Victorian Certificate of Education and encompasses four sub-schools: Kindergarten (3 to 4 year olds), Junior School (Prep to Year 4), Middle School (Years 5 to 8) and Senior School (Years 9 to 12). The schools pride themselves on their capacity to provide a broad and engaging academic and co-curricular program for all students. They have always welcomed and supported students with disability and/or additional needs; however, over the past two years had reviewed the provision of learning and support services for these students. S1 has approximately fifty (n=50) students who have IEPs and S2 has approximately sixty-three (n=63) students who have IEPs. Students' levels of adjustment ranged from 'support provided within quality differentiated teaching practice' to 'supplementary adjustment'. Class sizes varied from 24 to 29 students with approximately 2 to 5 students with IEPs in each class.

Research design

The phenomenological foundation of this study provided us with comprehensive descriptions of school leaders' experience that uncovered existing subjective meanings of the development and implementation of IEPs for students with disability and/or additional needs (Creswell, 2014; Hammersley & Campbell, 2012). Phenomenological research is described as a design of inquiry in which the researcher illuminates the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2007; 2014, p. 14; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon of interest in this study was how school leaders experienced the adoption of IEPs to inform pedagogy for students with disability and/or additional needs. To gain detailed depiction of each participant's perspective, focus groups provided an "educative function" where participants listened to each other, echoed what was said at times and supported each other's understanding of the discussion topic in relation to their school's philosophy and policy on the implementation of inclusive practices and IEPs for students with disability and/or additional needs (Wilson, 1997, p. 220).

Data collection method

Focus groups provided school leaders with an opportunity to share their stories and illustrate the meaning of the data in a socially interactive setting at their respective sub-schools (Wilson, 1997, p. 221). Three focus group sessions of 45 minutes were audio recorded with appropriate consent obtained from participants. The focus group protocol was precisely created with open-ended questions to discover how school leaders perceived, understood and valued the use of IEPs to cater for students with disability and/or additional needs within an inclusive classroom setting (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The focus group protocol was piloted with friends and colleagues to validate the type of questions and

accuracy of the focus group techniques and protocol prior to conducting the actual focus groups with participants for the study.

The formulation of the following focus group questions was pivotal in informing the design of this study to gather a wealth of data from school leaders: (a) What is the philosophy of inclusive education at this school? (b) How are students with disability and/or additional needs supported in your school? (c) How are adjustments for students with disability and/or additional needs recorded or documented at the school? (d) When does the school determine that an IEP is necessary for a student with disability and/or additional needs? (e) What process is followed when transferring information about students with disability and/or additional needs during transition stages? (f) What provisions are made for teachers to undertake professional development on IEPs and inclusive practices? (g) What information or strategies are available to teachers on how to implement IEPs for students with disability and/or additional needs? (h) What strategies are in place at the school to encourage collaboration and/or consultation when developing the student's IEP? (i) In your leadership role, how have you helped to develop a strong culture for IEP implementation at your school? (j) What are your views on the usefulness of IEPs?

The focus group sessions were efficiently conducted by using a PowerPoint presentation of the questions for participants to easily follow and contribute towards the discussion. Throughout each session it was important to connect with participants by encouraging their comments without making any judgements in relation to the information that they provided. Discretion was used regarding the order in which questions were asked. Clarification of details was sought to delve into the discussion for further description and to ensure that relevant and rich data was gathered to correspond with the research enquiry and chosen method of the study (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Participants

As shown in Table 1, the total sample size of n=12 participants consisted of n=5 primary school leaders and n=7 secondary school leaders. We have sought to guarantee full anonymity to minimise the risk of identification, and referred to participants by their role. Participants provided voluntary informed consent based on their complete understanding of the study prior to data collection. All information collected preceding the commencement of the study and for the duration of the research remained confidential and secure.

Table 1 School Leaders’ Profile

Primary School Leaders (PSL)		Secondary School Leaders			
		Middle School Leaders (MSL)		Senior School Leaders (SSL)	
		School 1 (S1)		School 2 (S2)	
PSL1	Head of School	MSL3	Year 7-8 Teacher and Coordinator	SSL1	Prep – Year 12 Learning Support Coordinator
PSL2	Year 3 Teacher and Coordinator	SSL3	Year 7-12 Teacher and Head of Department	MSL1	Head of School
PSL3	Year 2 Teacher and Coordinator	SSL4	Year 10–12 Teacher and Head of Department	SSL2	Head of Teaching and Learning
PSL4	Prep Teacher and Coordinator			MSL2	Year 8 Teacher and Coordinator
PSL5	Prep – Year 12 Learning Support Coordinator				
5		3		4	

Data analysis procedure

Audiotapes were transcribed and transferred from spoken to written word to facilitate analysis. Our analysis of data commenced with a general review of transcripts and the writing of memos about ideas and potential themes using NVivo. Initially the data was sorted into key categories and subsequently ‘chunked’ the text into broad topic areas to identify specific extracts relating to the study (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). We were prompted to concentrate on reflective questioning and linking of ideas, developing categories and manipulating the data to allow for a process of open coding in order to gain familiarity with the detail of data (Bazeley, 2013). Furthermore, we manually transferred the data onto individually labelled charts to additionally create a visual representation of the substantial amount of rich data that was gathered. We ensured on having a well-structured coding system which provided us with an effective tool to facilitate further analysis of the data (Bazeley, 2013).

Thematic analysis of the data led us to identify three key ideas from this study: (1) IEPs guide professional practice and student support; (2) Collaboration and communication: a collegial approach to IEPs; and (3) Professional development to enhance teachers’ understanding and use of IEPs. We noted that these key ideas featured in each focus group and generated elaborate discussions as outlined in the results section below. Excerpts from participants that were descriptive of the overall data collection were selected to personify the analysis.

Results and discussion

Throughout the analysis of the data, we found that school leaders hinged on the DDA, Standards and the NCCD as guiding parameters which were incorporated into the school’s philosophy to ensure that students with disability and/or additional needs were best catered for within the classroom. These legislations spurred school leaders to create clear frameworks

and structures that directed the IEP process in terms of who was responsible in the development, implementation and evaluation stages of the IEP. Furthermore, it stirred up school leaders to explore new and innovative ways of working with teachers to improve IEP practice within the school. Deppeler and Harvey (2004) suggested that establishing a practical standard framework within a school would serve as a guide for educators to evaluate and improve existing inclusive practices, and demonstrate the effectiveness of whole school change through teacher professional development. By drawing from an eclectic body of literature, we critically analysed the three key findings from this study with reference to participants' views in the following sections.

IEPs guide professional practice and student support

Previous research indicated that IEPs were often vague, unfocused and difficult to use in guiding instructional planning (Capizzi, 2008). However, our study revealed that school leaders illuminated the IEP process as best practice in offering direction on curriculum and instructional planning including the delivery of services for students with disability and/or additional needs within classrooms. Findings indicated that school leaders ratified the implementation of IEPs by teachers to facilitate the participation of students with disability and/or additional needs in activities with their peers. Teachers were determined to take responsibility for implementing IEPs and including both the student and learning support staff within the classroom. IEPs together with an array of existing practices, personal teaching tools and resources were used in classrooms to support students with disability and/or additional needs. According to Lee (2003, p. 395), "equity in education requires that learning environments in school respect and draw meaningfully on the resources that students across diverse backgrounds take from their everyday experiences." The present study showed that quality, inclusive education for students with disability and/or additional needs was

exemplified within the broader agenda of school leaders' pursuit of equity and excellence for all students. School leaders attested that by putting IEPs into practice, students with disability and/or additional needs can actively participate and contribute in all areas of their schooling when they are included within the classroom, "It [IEPs] created a culture that is feasible, [and made] possible the equality [for students]. Teaching [these students within the classroom] is really the answer, not removing them and having specialists help and you don't know what's going on" (PSL5, Focus Group 1). This finding confirms Lee-Tarver's (2006) argument that the use of IEPs are maintained by the belief that the needs of individual students are diverse and can be addressed within a general classroom.

A number of participants articulated that IEPs were extremely useful in terms of developing partnership with other teachers and parents. This corresponds with claims put forward by Dempsey (2012, p. 28) that effective IEP development and implementation authenticates that students receive quality education, and classroom teachers are able to achieve what is widely viewed as best practice. School leaders recurrently referred to IEPs as a working document that informed planning and provided a means for communicating students' learning needs, "It's like documenting for parents, *'this is what we do.'* It's important for us to do an extra document; good in terms of informing expectations. The reality is, the child's part of a class and there's adjustments [to be made]" (PSL1, Focus Group 1). Parents and all other stakeholders are assured that an authentic program has been prepared for the student and the school has engaged appropriate accountability measures to evaluate the IEP process (Shaddock et al., 2009). School leaders further reflected on the purpose and usefulness of IEPs as a communication tool by stating, "As teachers, we have that passion to support students but it [IEPs] makes teachers accountable too. It gives us a platform to communicate effectively with parents about the sorts of adjustments we're making [for their child]" (PSL3, Focus Group 1). In addition, school leaders pointed out that

teachers should not create unreasonable expectations, take too much on or step into the parent's role. PSL1 said that it was imperative for teachers to be realistic about what they could effectively and efficiently provide to support students. She continued by saying, "IEPs helped to moderate all of that and rendered clarity regarding our specific roles, what was happening and how parents could accomplish their part of the IEP" (Focus Group 1).

According to Rieser (2012), school leaders promote an inclusive education system at a school policy level by supporting the delivery of an innovative curriculum, establishing continuous and flexible assessment processes, and creating a school that embrace differences where students support each other through peer and collaborative learning. Thus, we argue that school leaders are in the best position to decide on how particular issues related to the pedagogy of students with disability and/or additional needs impacts teachers' roles and professional learning needs. One way of improving teaching and learning in the classroom for students with disability and/or additional needs is ensuring that teachers engage in ongoing decision making and adopt practices that are based on evidence of effectiveness (Deppeler, Loreman, & Sharma, 2005; Deppeler, Loreman, & Smith, 2015; Slavin, 2017). Data that was relevant in critiquing the efficacy of IEPs to enhance students' learning outcomes and how decisions are made in relation to IEP practices at a whole school level was resonated by school leaders. Our study exemplified that school leaders sought ways to measure the effectiveness of support and instruction for students with disability and/or additional needs and instigated changes when the provisions of support was ineffective (Yell et al., 2013). PSL2 cogently illustrated school leaders' efficiency in implementing IEPs to enhance students' learning outcomes by saying, "We've always supported students with disability and/or additional needs but we've probably fine-tuned how we support them; we re-evaluated what's working and not working, and looked at how we assess students to target their needs better" (PSL2, Focus Group 1). MSL1 and MSL2 (Focus Group 3) echoed the

need for teachers to have high expectations for all students. They proposed that teachers should connect with students and understand their needs to best cater for them. For example, they argued that, “strategies [on IEPs] are great but most of the strategies would not really work unless there was a relationship with the student.”

In addition, PSL2 affirmed that IEPs were useful in terms of tracking how students achieved their goals, “It’s good to see if that strategy or adjustment is no longer needed or they’ve [students] moved on from that need. It’s [IEP] a working document, it’s not going to be the same IEP forever otherwise it’s not useful” (Focus Group 1). Hence, school leaders reiterated the significance of establishing practices and processes to monitor the performance and educational progress of students with disability and/or additional needs.

Collaboration and consultation: a collegial approach to IEPs

How teachers teach and students learn depends on the collaborative and consultative culture reflected within a school where the best provision of resources is to support and enhance the ability of teachers to respond to the diverse needs of all students (Jordan, 2001). School leaders indicated that teachers interacted and collaborated with colleagues at all levels to meet the needs of students and promote inclusive services. The data highlighted that there was a paradigm shift from the provision of isolated services for students with disability and/or additional needs to a more collaborative and team approach of sharing strategies. Teachers frequently liaised and communicated with the Year Level Coordinator (YLC) and Learning Support Coordinator when they had questions about the IEP or how to support students with disability and/or additional needs. Our study revealed that school leaders instituted strategies and structures to encourage collaborative practices when preparing IEPs. It was evident from the data that participants appreciated having a professional learning community approach within their school where teachers worked in teams when developing

IEPs. Primary school leaders designated one of the year level meetings for teams to get underway with preparing students' IEPs. These meetings were facilitated by the YLC, and provided an opportunity for feedback and input into the student's IEP from all of their teachers. Having well-defined school structures clearly influenced teachers' initial expectations when it came to developing IEPs. For example, YLCs worked with their year level team in overseeing the administration of IEPs:

I work with and support Prep teachers with the writing of IEPs. We sit together, talk about it and write our IEPs. I proof-read all of them [IEPs] for Prep before they [IEPs] go home to the parents, and make sure that the adjustments are manageable for students. Then we've got the next level up which will be the Head of Junior school who would support the YLCs if there was a question I wasn't able to answer. We've got the Head of School and the Learning Support Coordinator to support us. There's that sort of structure we have to support us. (PSL4, Focus Group 1)

Taking into account school leaders' assertion that promoting IEPs within their schools required a sense of shared ownership and collaboration by all stakeholders, we noted that a fundamental factor in facilitating IEP implementation pivots on senior leadership bringing them to fruition (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014). PSL5 reiterated that by having Heads of Schools accept the responsibility of ensuring IEPs are executed within their respective sub-schools, "the ownership is starting to fall in a structural way which means that we can make sure that IEPs are being written, they're being implemented, appearing in teachers' work programs and reviewed (Focus Group 1). "[as Head of School], one thing that I've done to develop a strong culture of IEP implementation is to remove it from the domain of someone else and place it into the domain of the classroom teacher" (PSL1, Focus Group 1). Similar

sentiments regarding the relationship and team effort by all staff in promoting the implementation of IEPs was shared by SSL1:

...the reality is, without the support of the leadership of this school then none of this [putting the IEPs together and flowcharts on how we do things] would happen anyway. Catering for students with disabilities needs to be recognised at the top end of the school for it to be able to be implemented at the goal post. It's team work from the Principal down to the Year Level Coordinators through to the Heads of Teaching and Learning, and Heads of sub-schools even through to our Ed Support staff. So it's really valued right from the top. (Focus Group 3)

Research suggests that in order for schools to achieve effective IEP practices, emphasis should move towards teaching and learning, and collaboration (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011). Transition planning for students with disability and/or additional needs entails the creation of IEPs with specific goals and strategies to scaffold each stage: primary to secondary, secondary to post-secondary, including students progressing from one grade level to the next grade level (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2011; Shaddock et al., 2009). School leaders maintained that the IEP provided an ongoing record to assist all key stakeholders with continuity in programming and transition planning for students with disability and/or additional needs. The data highlighted that as part of the IEP process, teachers were encouraged to consider key elements such as individualised and transition centred instruction, and the active involvement and collaboration of all stakeholders during transition planning at each stage of the student's schooling (Mitchell et al., 2010). IEPs were included as part of the handover of documentation during the transition process to inform teachers of previous goals and strategies that verified the student's progress. Due to the immense documentation that usually accompanied students with

disability and/or additional needs, school leaders believed that it was important to embark on a process of filtering pertinent information for teachers to use. PSL1 (Focus Group 1) commented that they looked into a combination of dialogues between staff, “We believe, conversations at YLC level is important as well as at teacher level.” This prompted PSL5 (Focus Group 1) to highlight that YLCs across the school received summaries of students’ information from the Learning Support Coordinator which they used to communicate within their teams about students’ needs.

One of the challenges S2 previously encountered was that teachers overlooked students with disability and/or additional needs in the classroom. Parents voiced their concerns that teachers were often unaware their child had a disability. Reflecting on the literature, Frankl (2005) makes reference to teachers not just taking into account students’ needs but having the responsibility to effectively plan learning opportunities that meet the needs of all their students. Our findings indicated that school leaders were invited to establish procedures outlining the prerequisites from stakeholders in determining when an IEP was required for students. For example, SSL1 stated, “By putting in place IEPs, it has really brought students’ needs to the attention of staff and there’s no excuse why a teacher doesn’t know that a student has a disability to appropriately cater for their needs” (Focus Group 3). On the contrary, S1 created cut-offs to determine when students were eligible for an IEP. Previously, IEPs were initiated for a number of students without a diagnosis or who had an informal diagnosis. PSL1 indicated, “We drew that back because we looked at the NCCD and realised we needed to have really clear categories to have IEPs, so we started to work with those [NCCD adjustment] levels.” PSL5 commented that teachers worked with the learning profile and recommendations from the specialists’ assessment report to familiarise themselves with what the student required and thereafter wrote the IEP. During parent-teacher interviews, teachers discussed the adjustments they made for the student. These

adjustments were recorded in the IEP, teacher's work program and parent-teacher interview' minutes.

Furthermore, findings in this study revealed that school leaders served as a strong voice for students with disability and/or additional needs. They maintained their commitment in continuing to closely monitor and appropriately plan by ensuring that what is proposed best meets the needs of all students. School leaders identified teacher effort as being exceptional when it came to exploring ways at what was working or what they could do better to cater for students with disability and/or additional needs (SSL3, Focus Group 3). Moreover, school leaders undertook a consultative role by working with teachers in: (1) implementing strategies to support students with disability and/or additional needs, (2) observing the student's performance over a period of time, and (3) reviewing the student's progress through probing questions such as *'have students met their goals and do we need to change things?'*; *'what's happening there and is the student actually making an effort?'*; *'what's happening with the strategies that we've put in place and what do we need to do?'* and so forth (SSL2, Focus Group 3). These findings demonstrate that school leaders adopted a social model perspective in identifying barriers and acquiring solutions to develop outcome-based programs for students with disability and/or additional needs (Rieser, 2012, p. 40).

Professional development to enhance teachers' understanding and use of IEPs

Educating students with disability and/or additional needs in an inclusive classroom with access to the regular education environment requires careful planning and preparation. Our data alludes that school leaders were prepared to support their teachers as 'risk-takers' in attempting innovative teaching practices and implementing IEPs for students with disability and/or additional needs (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014). We found that school

leaders repeatedly expressed that there was no single best approach to acquiring professional development (PD) to educate students with disability and/or additional needs. The Learning Support Coordinator held presentations on IEPs and supported staff through staff meetings and other professional resourcing, “We’ve had whole school and sectional training on specific areas relating to quality teaching practice on how we can support all students” (PSL2, Focus Group 1). PSL5 believed that it was vital in having a distinct vision and supporting teachers when initiating changes within school structures:

My role has been to put all those things together and make it feasible, accessible and clearly defined for teachers. Resourcing that, so teachers know where it all fits. Just where and how so that the benefits of an IEP actually happens, is accessible to teachers and making a difference in the student’s learning. (Focus Group 1)

Previous studies emphasised that educators must have knowledge of the DDA and understand federal requirements for IEP meetings to ensure compliance and recognition of potential violations (Cheatham, Hart, Malian, & McDonald, 2012). This study highlighted that as part of a whole-school professional learning initiative, school leaders ensured that teachers undertook online training on the DDA and the Standards to guide them in individual learning planning and how to support students with disability and/or additional needs:

There’s been a very intentional move in making sure that any student with disability and/or additional needs are included according to the Act ... there’s the legal side of it but also the moral aspect to it ... that each child is made unique and has a purpose, and we would want to see them developed to their full potential. So obviously that’s possible and it’s the school’s role to facilitate that. (PSL5, Focus Group 1)

Staff additionally received training on the NCCD which generated significant discussion on teachers taking responsibility to make reasonable adjustments for students. School leaders observed that teachers were beginning to examine the adjustments they implemented in the classroom for students, “I have seen a lot more dialogue in my travels [around the school] just about adjustments. I think that there is greater awareness now and NCCD has been a huge part of that” (PSL5, Focus Group 1). Similarly, PSL1 stated that the NCCD provided an opportunity for them to share information, “We had a meeting about our IEP process and referenced those ‘*guidelines on adjustments*’ [from NCCD] for teachers to record adjustments [on students’ IEPs]” (Focus Group 1). Participants drew attention to existing inclusive practices that were adopted in their school and indicated that the IEP process was recognised as part of good teaching and learning. According to (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014, p. 117), proactive school leaders identify their strengths and believe that they already have some practices to support inclusive education in their schools. In light of this, PSL5 described the fundamentals required to enhance teaching and learning practices for IEP implementation, “I think differentiation, formative assessment and all the focus that’s coming through teaching and learning is very nicely linked into IEP implementation, equipping [teachers] with PD to meet students’ needs” (Focus Group 1).

Collaboration amongst colleagues for support with IEPs was highly praised. “The Learning Support staff are extremely talented and know what they’re talking about so we can ask them [for help with IEPs] but it is down to us to be putting it together” (MSL3, Focus Group 2). Participants acknowledged colleagues as being supportive in offering advice, “We’d chat in the staff room with our Head of School and Learning Support Coordinator if we’re unsure about IEPs or knock on her door and ask for help; we’re very collaborative like that” (PSL4, Focus Group 1). MSL1 indicated that teachers engaged in team teaching or co-teaching which they acknowledged as an effective practice in communicating and

collaborating about students' needs, "Students are discussed informally across the staff anytime during the day; often it's pertinent to that particular child rather than that particular disability as such" (Focus Group 3). School leaders identified teachers who had exemplary knowledge related to IEPs and established systems for staff to contribute towards each other's professional growth through a range of approaches (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014). For example, SSL2 described opportunities that were set-up for teachers to exchange knowledge, "Some of the PLP [Professional Learning Plans] sessions can vary between general staff meetings to PD workshops on IEPs or inclusive teaching (SSL2, Focus Group 3). Furthermore, it was noted that primary and secondary colleagues included each other in meetings when promoting awareness on particular initiatives relating to students with disability and/or additional needs.

School leaders regularly drew teachers' attention to external PD opportunities and greatly valued the wealth of knowledge that they gained by accessing professional training from experts with deep experience in the field. PD advice was generally sought from Independent Schools Victoria (ISV) their sector representative. For example, ISV consultants provided PD for staff at the school on particular inclusive practices (PSL2, Focus Group 1). PSL1 believed that the level of staff expertise was significantly elevated since key leaders, namely YLCs were important influences within their teams for sharing knowledge (Focus Group 1). SSL4 brought to light the advantages of having teachers network with other schools to support their professional learning (Focus Group 2). Since schools emphasised that teachers will take responsibility to include and make provisions for students with disability and/or additional needs within the classroom, PSL3 stated that as a graduate teacher she felt further equipped and educated in knowing how to cater for students:

... by having learning support staff work with students in the classroom, includes the child in the task you're doing and it's become less of a withdrawal program. I feel

more equipped with knowing how to actually make adjustments [for students]. I feel like we've been educated in knowing how to do it because as a 'newer' teacher that's not always something you know or get taught at university. I think professionally for me; it has been a big learning curve. As a classroom teacher it has helped me but also in leadership just to grow my own knowledge beyond what it had been before. (Focus Group 1)

The profound insights discussed above by PSL3 concurs with Agbenyega's and Sharma's (2014) views that by including students with disability and/or additional needs within the classroom, teachers eventually develop confidence and are equipped with new skills to engage all learners. What stood out as a highpoint in this study was that school leaders' appreciated having a collegial and collaborative workplace which they believed encouraged them to continually find ways in becoming more efficient when developing and implementing IEPs. SSL1's statements echoed the benefits of imparting knowledge amongst colleagues to understand and use student data effectively to make appropriate instructional adjustments:

We can think of PDs as something we do externally as opposed to communicating and sharing with each other and supporting each other. There's been a huge amount of learning even in how to understand [data from] specialists' assessment reports and those sorts of things (Focus Group 3).

Thomson et al. (2002, p. 42) pointed out that there is considerable merit in having a "shared, problem-solving approach" to whole-school planning regarding curriculum design for students with disability and/or additional needs and exploring pedagogic practices to develop authentic IEPs. Our research reports that the Head of Teaching and Learning and the

Learning Support Coordinator worked closely in meaningfully strengthening collaborative practices amongst teachers (Florian, 2008). For example, SSL1 and SSL2 actively worked together by supporting teachers when there were confusions regarding curriculum modifications and making adjustments for students undertaking VCE. SSL2 said, “I think that’s an ongoing process and it’s something that we don’t just leave but we have to constantly remind and communicate with staff” (Focus Group 3). School leaders further created a distinct strategy in having an online repository for staff to easily access resources and to encourage continued learning and refinement of strategies. They emphasised, “We started that process on Moodle placing key resources to inform staff about students’ needs or diagnosis, links and checklists to help them investigate those needs and processes about IEPs or what to do if they’re concerned about students” (PSL5, Focus Group 1).

Finally, in endeavouring to provide teachers with access to resources, school leaders established ways to maximise the expertise of existing staff (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014). Based on this, our study suggests that school leaders were committed in their endeavours to promote shared leadership and sustain inclusive practice initiatives by creating ways for knowledge building and sharing to take place within the school community (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). The significance of school leaders taking on a mediatory role in sharing their expertise with colleagues and to ensure the use of practices that promote student achievement was highlighted by PSL3:

... just supporting my team to develop in their knowledge is probably as a YLC where I come in to help them write and implement IEPs and know where to access the information; being a bit of a ‘go to’. Then, me having to go to someone else and source information to take back to the team. I think I’ve been a bit of a middle man in supporting my team to be able to access that information. (Focus Group 1)

Implication and Conclusion

This study provided a rich description and glimpse into how school leaders in two Australian schools experienced the development and use of IEPs in programming for quality inclusive education for students with disability and/or additional needs. We affirm that our research brought to light the significance of school leaders creating collaborative and interpersonal practices that facilitated dialogue, support and sharing amongst colleagues when developing and implementing students' IEPs (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Hence, the implementation of effective inclusive practices in classrooms is greatly influenced by the motivation school leaders create, teachers' beliefs about students' ability and disability, and collegial differences in beliefs and practices to support students with disability and/or additional needs within the classroom (Jordan & McGhie-Richmond, 2014). Understanding teachers' beliefs, perspectives and practices of IEPs are important for improving educational processes for students with disability and/or additional needs. Beliefs and perspectives are closely linked to teachers' strategies for developing IEPs and coping with challenges in their daily professional life when programming for students with disability and/or additional needs.

An important implication gleaned from this research is that the act of navigating an effective IEP process takes commitment from school leaders in recognising and appreciating the various capitals (knowledge, skills, attitudes) that each stakeholder brings within the inclusive school community (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014). Accordingly, we conclude that teaching and learning pertaining to inclusive practices and IEPs can be profoundly enriched across the whole school when school leaders recognise the importance of ensuring that teachers have the skill set to use evidence-based strategies in developing meaningful IEPs as a way to improve the learning outcomes for students with disability and/or additional needs (Yell et al., 2013). IEPs can be expected to mediate the effects of classroom related practices

– such as modification in curricula for students with varying educational needs. Teachers will need to consider how students with disability and/or additional needs best learn and develop in all curricula areas, by using an array of pedagogical approaches for teaching and learning (Australian Government, 2014). Our research suggests that school leaders need to keep an open mind and recognise that there is always work to be accomplished in improving inclusive practices and IEP implementation. School leaders can be assured that as they plan for measurable inclusive practice outcomes, the “social capital grows when stakeholders work together for the benefit of all students and teachers” (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 12). Thus, a future study needs to examine the perspectives of teachers who use IEPs with their students, and establish evidence of how the use of IEPs lead to enhanced learning outcomes for all students.

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