Points from the SENCo-Forum

What is ‘additional and different’ about IEPs?

Recently there has been a very extensive strand of messages in the SENCo-Forum reflecting SENCos’ concerns about writing IEPs in the light of the revised SEN Code of Practice. This concern has been reported in a previous column, headed ‘When is an IEP worth the paper it is written on?’ (Vol. 28 No. 1, p.45, March 2001) summarising SENCos’ views before the revised Code was issued.

The majority of SENCos exchanging views in the current strand were working in secondary schools. Their particular concern was that they had been writing a large number of IEPs, and still wondered whether these were making any practical impact on pupils’ learning. So the question arises, whether the revised Code raises the threshold for writing an IEP. What is ‘different and additional’ about an IEP so that it enables a pupil to achieve acceptable progress?

The Code stresses that teaching in schools generally should match the individual learning needs of pupils and that this involves differentiation of teaching approaches in the light of pupils’ learning outcomes. Several SENCos mentioned that, if this level of flexibility is expected as a whole-school policy, then there should be fewer pupils who would reach the threshold of requiring an IEP. Several SENCos pointed out that teachers’ performance reviews in any case involve them in considering how pupils in their class groups are responding to the teaching offered. Consequently teachers should be more aware of the need to be responsive to the individual needs of all their pupils.

SENCos argued that writing IEPs for large numbers of pupils becomes self-defeating. Time constraints mean that SENCos spend an inordinate proportion of their time keeping up with the administration and paperwork involved. The revised Code also stresses that parents and the pupils themselves should be regularly consulted about IEPs, and there is no way in which this can be achieved with large numbers of pupils. SENCos found that time is not available to consult with all the subject teachers about the targets for the pupils concerned. The subject teachers themselves are faced with so many individual targets for so many of their pupils that it becomes impossible to keep track of them – let alone to carry out the specific reviews required several times in a school year.

There was no dissent among SENCos on the importance of raising awareness about the individual learning needs of pupils, and of monitoring the effectiveness with which those needs are met. A number of SENCos described ways in which they have devised approaches that help class teachers. Some SENCos indicate the main areas of a pupil’s needs within their IEPs, and then leave it to the individual teachers to specify how these can best be met within their particular subject areas. SENCos also suggest that teachers should identify the pupils in their classes who have similar needs, and to target their differentiated teaching to these pupils as a group. This approach can sometimes be shared with teaching assistants, who can then monitor the pupils’ response. Teaching assistants are also given the task of contributing information to the review of pupils’ IEPs. Some SENCos appear to operate a graduated degree of direct involvement in formulating IEPs. They reported that they themselves monitor and review pupils with Statements particularly closely along with the outside professionals concerned with the pupils. As has been previously reported in this column, SENCos have found that OFSTED inspections have not always appreciated the strategic thinking and consideration that has gone into these attempts to resolve the ambiguities within the specifications of the Code.

The issues raised reflect the relativity of the criterion of ‘additional or different’. In the earlier column reporting on the exchange of messages between SENCos, the point arose that most schools now make a range of provision targeted at groups of pupils who have particular learning needs. In secondary schools the current drive on helping pupils with literacy and numeracy difficulties at Key Stage 3 is one instance of this kind of development, which requires a higher degree of flexible teaching and individual pupil progress monitoring. This approach then forms part of the whole-school spectrum of response to the needs of any current cohort of pupils served by a school at a particular time. It represents part of a school’s general organisation and pupil evaluation system. For example, the individual pupil records would provide the context in which progress is monitored.

Extending the range of schools’ flexibility in response to pupils’ individual needs makes it possible to raise the threshold for identifying a smaller number of pupils for whom an IEP would be appropriate. At the same time other benefits immediately accrue. The limited number of pupils allows SENCos and teachers actually to achieve the individual attention and level of communication with pupils and parents that can achieve progress, and so ensure that the IEP actually becomes worthwhile. Correspondingly, SENCos can gain time to play their part in furthering a whole-school special needs policy to meet pupils’ needs. One crucial part of this role, which is also emphasised in the Code, is that SENCos can contribution to the in-service support of teachers, to help them towards greater flexibility in their teaching approaches.

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Further details about the Forum and how to join are available from Jason.Douglas@becta.org.uk or from the Special Needs Administrator, BECTA, Milburn Hill Road, Science Park, Coventry CV4 7JJ. Tel: 02476 416994; Fax: 02476 411418.