The evaluation of the Negotiated Curriculum Plan in South Australia

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In the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) in South Australia, IEP’s for students with disabilities are called Negotiated Curriculum Plans (NCP’s). There was a need to revise the NCP because of imminent policy changes in DETE. These include the rewriting of the Students with Disabilities Policy (1991) and the 2002 implementation of South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA) for all students.

Key stakeholders in the NCP process included parents, students, educators and service providers who were invited to take part in focus groups that were conducted in metropolitan and rural centres in South Australia. The purpose of the focus groups was to discover participants’ understanding of the NCP, identification of its strengths and weaknesses as well as the essential elements of an NCP. Participants were also asked for suggestions for the format of the new NCP. The information from the focus groups was developed into a series of recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophically, an Individualised Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities is the key document for providing curriculum access and participation and identifying special education services that underpin student achievement. IEP’s have the potential to improve a student’s education as they can specify the student's present level of performance, identify related services and state the goals that are to be achieved.

Purpose of the research

In the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) in South Australia, IEP's for students with disabilities are called Negotiated Curriculum Plans (NCP's). There was a need to revise the NCP because of imminent policy changes in DETE. These include the rewriting of the Students with Disabilities Policy (1991) and the 2002 implementation of South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA) for all students. Currently, the NCP refers to Statements and Profiles, which is the present mandated curriculum. Therefore, when the new curriculum is implemented, the language of the NCP would be out of date. The current NCP had first been developed in South Australia in 1991, then revised in 1997. It was opportune at this time to review and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the NCP.

Background

The Negotiated Curriculum Plan (NCP), is a key implementation strategy of the Students with Disabilities Policy (1991), in DETE. Students eligible for support are those with a
‘...physical, intellectual or sensory impairment and/or disabilities in communication and language. These students will have been referred for special education support by the guidance or speech pathology service’ (Students with Disabilities Policy 1991). Students receiving support through the policy are required to have an NCP developed and documented at significant times in their schooling. This includes initial enrolment, at points of transition, when transferring from one school to another or when a guidance officer or speech pathologist refers the student for special education support.

Often schools review the NCP annually or more frequently on a need’s basis. The purpose of the plan is to bring together the key stakeholders to negotiate the curriculum access and participation needs of the student. This can include parents/caregivers, the school principal or their delegate, the student, the teacher and appropriate special education personnel. DETE and non-DETE support services and agency personnel may also be involved. The resultant plan includes identified strengths, needs, agreed actions, review processes and related responsibilities. Issues of Aboriginality, low socioeconomic status, isolation, culture and gender are also taken into account.

**Research questions**

At the outset of this project, it needs to be made clear that the IEP that is being evaluated is the South Australian NCP, not IEPs in general. The questions asked of the focus group participants can be found on page 9 and relate to the participants' understanding of the purpose of the NCP, what are it's strengths and weaknesses and what should the essential elements of a new NCP be. The participants were also asked for suggestions for the format of the NCP. The information from the focus groups was developed into a series of recommendations from which the new NCP will be developed.

In considering what the future NCP may look like in South Australia, it is interesting to look at the history of educational planning for students with disabilities.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Historical perspectives**

The concept of individualised planning in special education is not new. Over a hundred and thirty years ago Dr Edouard Seguin (1866) discussed individualising education for children with special needs. Dr Sequin wrote that: “...the individuality of the children is to be secured, for respect of individuality is the first test of the fitness of a teacher... (individual planning) will secure the sanctity of true originality against the violent sameness of that most considerable part of education, the general training” (p 26).

This was a plea to include individual planning in teacher training so that uniqueness of the learner could be accommodated and was acknowledgment of the fact that learners’ needs differ. Approximately 100 years later, John Dewey's philosophy of American Education had a profound affect on educators. Dewey wrote that each child is ‘entitled to equal opportunity of development of his own capacities, be they large or small in range... each has needs of his own, as significant to him as those of others are to them"(cited in Abernathy 1959, p.254).

In recognition of this, educators began using a number of strategies to meet the individual needs of students. Schrag (1996) includes among these team teaching, practices for determining strengths and weaknesses and acknowledgment that learners have different learning styles. Dewey’s ideas and approach to education have been given a fresh perspective by those who currently follow the paradigm of the constructivist theory (Goddard, 1997).
Individualised Education Plans

For the purposes of this paper, IEP’s in the United States of America, Britain and South Australia were examined.

United States of America

In a briefing paper published by the National Information Centre for Children and Youth with Disabilities (1999), it was reported that Congress found that research into education in the last 20 years demonstrated the following. Effective education systems of the present and future should maintain high academic standards and clear performance goals for students with disabilities. These should be consistent with the standards and expectations for all students in the education system. As well, appropriate and effective strategies and methodologies should be put in place to enable maximum opportunities for students to achieve this. Therefore, the IDEA Act requires the IDEA team to determine access and support issues for students to successfully engage in the classroom curriculum.

The Vermont Education Department (USA) has created an IEP for students with disabilities and those who have difficulty meeting educational standards for that state. This plan uses “common sense” language, authentic assessments, holistic planning and uses the curriculum framework for goal setting and identification of standards (Giangreco, 1996). This format could be considered in relation to the data collected from the focus groups in this research, as the new curriculum in South Australia is standards-based. Webster and Came (1996) suggest that rather than the content driven IEP that appears to be unachievable, a process driven IEP would be preferable. Such an NCP would begin with description of need rather than a detailed catalogue of the student’s difficulties.

Britain

In England and Wales currently, as in America, the IEP is a key component in accountability. Schools are expected to adopt them as a tool for setting out individual student’s needs, ensuring teaching targets are appropriate and stated goals are delivered in the time set (Webster & Came, 1996). Besides accountability, IEP’s in England are also a means of checking the way in which a school works for students with special educational needs (SEN). This includes how a school identifies, assesses, records, reports, communicates, co-ordinates, designs, plans, costs, allocates, delivers, reviews, monitors and evaluates. Teachers in England are not convinced of the value of an IEP in delivering the functions mentioned above because of the time it takes to put one together Webster and Came (1996). It would appear that too much is expected from one document. ‘IEP’s will prove useless as prompts for teaching and learning if they simply record masses of information and provide lists of teaching objectives. Decisions need to be made about who needs to know what, and for classroom practitioners and pupils themselves, how they set about managing learning for themselves’ (Webster & Came 1996, p8).

The Code of Practice

In the United Kingdom as a result of the Education Act (1993) schools are required to follow a national Code of Practice, which provides a range of structures and processes designed to support students with a wide range of learning needs. The Code has five stages of assessment and provision, which move from the individual classroom level, to the school level, to the involvement of external support agencies and finally to a formalised external assessment and statement process. The Code of Practice was revised in 2000 with the consultation phase due for completion in 2001 (Department for Education and Employment 2000). An IEP is required at Stages 2 and 3 of the Code of Practice and they are regarded as summary documents outlining practical plans that are based on past, present and future classroom activities, and of direct knowledge of the specific needs of the student (Cooper 1996).
Solity & Deavers (1999) argue that the proposed 60 million pounds that have been set aside for the development of IEP's in the United Kingdom in 2001, needs to be challenged. The reason for this is that such an investment carries with it the message that the current narrow practice should be maintained rather than an evaluation of its efficacy (Webster and Came 1996; Solity & Deavers 1999). In the IEP, they say, more importance is placed on where and how it happens rather than linking it to the teaching and learning process, its effectiveness and whether it changes children's learning outcomes, life expectations and experiences. Making South Australia's future NCP more effective by linking it to the teaching and learning processes within all key learning areas may help students to progress. If students with special learning needs are expected to progress, their learning will be interpreted differently and ultimately positive expectations will be conveyed to them. When all teaching proceeds on the basis of planned high expectations it will be reflected in higher student achievement (Solity & Deavers, 1999). Lucille Eber’s Wraparound Process is useful to look at in relation to this.

The Wraparound Process

Wraparound is an approach to planning and implementing child and family centred services and supports. The process was designed for students with emotional problems (Eber & Nelson, 1997). However, there are elements that are appropriate to consider in terms of the future plan in South Australia. Thinking differently about current service structures, student needs, family partnerships and professional roles is the key in this process. Effective collaboration that reflects services rather than the disability that the child may have, is vital in this process. Eber’s approach is to assess the problem, look at services or programs that are available and connect the child into those existing programs. Wraparound planning depends on blending natural supports with traditional services, for example, parent partners, community mentors and respite providers (Eber & Nelson, 1997). The key features of Wraparound are that:

- it must be community based
- services and supports must be tailored to meet the needs and identify the strengths of children and families, not to meet the needs of the system
- there is cultural competency building on the unique values, strengths, and social and racial characteristics of children
- there is family access, voice and ownership
- agencies must have access to flexible funding
- the process must be implemented on an interagency basis and owned by the community
- services must be unconditional
- outcomes must be measured.

This process is based on the principle of constructivism that builds on the unique values, strengths, and individual characteristics of children and honours the integrity of children as learners (Reid, Kurkjian & Carruthers 1994).

The members of the team who support the child are those in daily contact with the child and who have control over major resources or decisions. The extended team members are people who may come in to discuss resources, transitions or specific intervention. At an initial team meeting, a profile of life domains is developed that identifies: strengths, what has or is working for the child, perspectives and needs of the child. The profile also determines what needs immediate action and identifies what additional information is needed. One of the criticisms of the NCP is that often the meetings have too many members whose role is unclear. Eber’s idea of members only attending a meeting if there is something to contribute, is sound, and may prevent too many people attending meetings unnecessarily. Determination of the need to be in attendance could be decided at the previous meeting.

Wraparound contains elements that include the strengths and needs of the student, lateral thinking, collaboration, family access, voice and ownership and only includes at meetings those
people directly connected to the current needs of the child. Comparison of the findings of the focus groups and these elements of the Wraparound Process will be made in a later section of this report.

**Negotiated Curriculum Plans**

In South Australia, students with disabilities have an NCP that documents curriculum access and participation needs and services that underpin and support learning. The reason for this is partly that Garth Boomer, Associate Director General of Education (Curriculum) in the early 90's advocated that curriculum for all students should be negotiated so that teachers and students could collaboratively develop an appropriate learning plan across the required areas of study. Such a philosophy enabled the focus for student learning to be within the required areas of study of the mandated curriculum and avoided skills based individual education plans.

The writers of the Students with Disabilities Policy (1991) adopted this philosophy. Two of the key people involved in the development of the original NCP offered the following anecdotal information to the researcher in the latter part of 2000 (Assistant Director, Disability and Professional Services DETE; Manager, Disability Services, North Group of Districts, DETE.).

As part of the first draft of the policy, special educators talked about curriculum that was appropriate and negotiated. This term was loosely used until a decision was made not to use the word appropriate. In South Australia, there was a strong feeling amongst special educators that there should be a true negotiation between parents, educators and service providers, and that learning for students with disabilities should be part of the mandated curriculum. Hence, the name negotiated curriculum plan.

Students with disabilities at that time needed to be able to access curriculum that was describable, achievable, assessable and powerful (Bigge, 1989), as there was little documentation of student involvement in the key learning areas, little accountability and the curriculum did not necessarily empower students to excel. Therefore, the first NCP, designed after the introduction of the Students with Disabilities Policy (1991), included students with disabilities in the key learning areas through the documentation of access and participation needs using negotiated inclusive processes. The rationale for this policy is that: *"All young people in South Australia have the right to gain through the public schooling system, a broad balanced education that will prepare them for effective participation in society"* (Educating for the 21st Century, 1990). Among this group of young people are students with disabilities who may require support in order to access and participate in a broad balanced curriculum.

**Relationship of problem to previous research**

Much has been written about Individualised Education Plans IEP’s, but there is little research on the NCP in South Australia, although some surveys have been conducted on its effectiveness. A search for articles on the NCP was made on ERIC, AEI, Kinetica and Family Databases, as well as various library databases (UNISA, Flinders, Barr Smith, SALSA). Checks were also made at the AEU site on the Internet.

The first of these surveys about the NCP was conducted in 1993 by the South Australian Institute of Teachers' (SAIT) Special Education Consultative Committee. Review of the implementation of the Students with Disabilities Policy by the union, which included a random survey of schools to determine the effectiveness of the NCP process. Data identified concerns about the number of people involved, the complexity of the document and the time taken to complete it (South Australian Institute of Teachers, 1993).

A second survey was conducted across all levels of schooling by personnel in the Targeted Populations Unit in the Education Department in 1993. Out of 50 principals surveyed, 39 responded. According to Chapman (1995), 60% of the participants stated that the NCP was useful because it assisted in:
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- the facilitation of school structures
- the formation of parent/school partnerships
- transition planning
- identification of the need for ongoing resourcing
- familiarisation of the process.

Information on the impact of the NCP on classroom practice was not requested in this survey. This is crucial information regarding the effectiveness of the NCP for students with disabilities and is a question that was asked of the focus groups in the current study. Chapman's (1995) thesis related to South Australian policy and practice for students with disabilities. She indicated in her research, that although teachers had not changed their teaching practice as a result of the NCP process and did not feel that the process assisted them to develop learning goals, there was improved communication between parents and teachers and special measures for individual students were documented.

Horrocks (2000) also identified parent and principal concerns regarding the NCP in her work on grievance resolution in special education. Some of the issues that emerged were the need for:

- training in NCP processes for both parents and school personnel
- including parents in the NCP process and valuing their input
- regularly updating the NCP
- clarifying the purpose of the NCP.

However, parents and principals who were interviewed for this research agreed that although these were ways in which the NCP could be improved, the NCP was an important document for the education of students with disabilities.

Education plans for students with disabilities are important as they formalise access arrangements that enable participation in the curriculum and document services related to the student's needs. The literature suggests that IEP's can be narrow and prescriptive and not connected to classroom practice (Weist & Griel, 1995; Rodger, 1995; Webster & Came, 1996; Goddard, 1997; and Solity & Deavers, 1999). Therefore, notice must be taken of the literature so that the mistakes that others have experienced may be circumvented in the future NCP in South Australia. Eber's Wraparound Process blends natural supports with service delivery and elements of this process could combine well with a constructivist approach and emergent themes from the literature as well as findings from this research. The next section describes the procedures used to gather information from participants who were involved in the research.

**RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

**Introduction**

This research project incorporates both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Focus groups provide qualitative data that were used to quantify information that formed the recommendations for the revision of the existing negotiated curriculum plan. The four major stages of qualitative research outlined by Miles & Huberman (1994) were used in this research report and include the:

- design of the investigation
- collection of data
- analysis of data
- summarising and integrating the findings

**Design of the investigation**

Structured focus group interviewing was chosen as the primary method of data collection for this research. A range of key stakeholders was invited to take part. These included parents, educators, students and service providers involved in the NCP process. The questions were
reviewed and revised several times before deciding on the final set and were tested out on colleagues in the field first.

**Data collection**

The techniques for data collection in this research included:
- thorough planning
- testing the chosen data collection instrument
- ethics and professionalism

Preliminary analysis of data occurred concurrently with data collection so that the two phases merged. The reasons for this was that there was the danger that the task of analysing large amounts of data became overwhelming and this may have resulted in the project not being completed or a reduced quality of work (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data was collected during 33 focus group interviews.

**Focus groups**

Focus groups are considered to be a valuable tool for social researchers and other professionals regardless of their particular field of inquiry where collective testimonies and narratives have gained credence (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The reason that qualitative techniques and in particular focus group interviews have taken time to be accepted is related to a reliance on numbers and the view that quantitative methods are more acceptable and reliable than qualitative methods (Krueger 1994). This reliance on data collected through empirical observations is termed positivism.

The term Individualised Education Plan was introduced in the United States of America with the passage of Public Law (PL) 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975. This act gave legal protection to teaching arrangements required by students with special needs (Webster & Came, 1996). In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (PL 101-476) not only retained the IEP but expanded its scope to include 16 year old students in transition from school. The term IEP is used to refer to a plan for curriculum, social adjustment, vocational education, physical education and adaptive behaviour related to special education and related services (Rodger 1995). In America, Congress stated that the original purposes of the IEP were to; provide an opportunity for communication among the parties regarding the IEP, encourage planning, assure an annual review and serve as an accountability tool (National Information Centre for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1999). This reflected the standards and related accountability systems used by many American states have the potential to exclude students with disabilities.

The influence of feminist and post modernist ethnographic studies has also created renewed interest in focus groups as a research method where postmodernists find it is possible to minimise the distance between researcher and participant. Feminists have found that positivistic research limits the ability to explore the real life experiences and situations. On the other hand, focus groups have the potential to maximise this (Le Compte, Millroy & Priessle 1992 and Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

The focus group interview is a collectivist rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences and beliefs (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). It describes people in natural situations where an accurate description relies on people disclosing information in a comfortable environment.

**What are focus groups?**

Focus groups were considered to be a very appropriate way of gathering data for the purposes of this research because of the benefits of empowerment, interaction and group dynamics.
Powell & Single's (1996) definition of a focus group is: ‘a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research’ (p 499).

Templeton (1994) defines the essential character of a focus group as ‘a small temporary community, formed for the purpose of the collaborative enterprise of discovery. The assembly is based on some interest shared by the group.’ (p4).

**Uses of focus groups**

Stewart & Shamdasani (1990), summarise the more common uses of focus groups. Two of the uses they describe are relevant for this research. The first is to obtain general background information about the topic of the NCP and second, to learn how participants talk about it. Focus groups were chosen as a way of gathering insights and shared understandings relating to the use of the current NCP and to obtain a range of perspectives about the process and content of the future document.

**Sampling**

Sampling is necessary because you can't study everyone, everywhere doing everything (Miles & Huberman 1994). In qualitative research purposive sampling is often used where sampling is done in a deliberate way with a purpose or focus in mind. For the purposes of this research, informant sampling was carried out where several steps needed to be taken to locate information-rich participants (Punch 1998). To encourage people with information to share, to attend the focus groups, a memo about the review of the NCP was written was and sent to District Superintendents, Managers Support Services, Managers Disability Services, Managers Early Childhood Services, Managers Hearing Impairment Services, Principals and Directors. This memo informed district personnel of the review and consultation details. An advertisement was distributed to assist principals to advertise the process in their school newsletter. A student consent form was also distributed with the offer of transport for students if they wished to attend.

**Method of ensuring confidentiality of information**

Although a range of data about participants was collected eg age, gender, occupation, and level of schooling, names were not. No names were used in the subsequent write-up of the research. At the beginning of each of the focus groups, participants were assured of confidentiality regarding the information they gave and the researcher not falsifying or presenting results out of context, as set out by the Australian Health Ethics Committee of the National Health and Medical Research Council, (1996).

**Permission to conduct the study**

Permission was sought and granted to undertake this research from the Ethics committee of the Department of Education, Training and Employment and the Flinders University of South Australia. Arrangements were made regarding the storage of data.

**Description of the participants**

Participants were the key stakeholders in the negotiated curriculum planning process. The researcher wanted to obtain as broad a coverage of feedback from as many groups as possible. Parents or caregivers of students with disabilities are key people in the NCP process and hence were consulted. Too often, the most important person in the NCP process is forgotten and that is the student. Therefore, an opportunity to include students’ views was considered to be of high priority. Unfortunately, only a few students were able to attend the focus groups. On enquiry it was discovered that in many instances, the school principal did not pass on the information about the focus groups to teachers, others said that that it was too difficult to
organise the students to come to the focus group venues. In hindsight, focus groups for students could have been conducted in their schools and information about the student focus groups sent out to special education teachers as well as their principals. However, some teachers said that they would like to involve their students, but they could not get to the focus groups. Consequently, written feedback was provided when the focus group questions were written down as a questionnaire.

Agencies such as the Crippled Children’s Association, Autism Association, Down Syndrome Society and advocacy groups, Teachers, School Services Officers and Early Childhood Workers, Principals and Directors Guidance Officers and Speech Pathologists were also part of the consultation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

Miles & Huberman (1994) describe data passing through three interrelated stages: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification. These may not be sequential but must be seen as separate and adequately planned. The data from focus groups are the transcripts or notes of the group's interaction. This may be the only data gathering technique used in a study or combined with other quantitative or qualitative techniques (Punch 1998). In this research, data was scrutinised in two ways for the main themes, using NUD*IST software as well as manually searching the text for themes. The taped data from the focus groups was transcribed in a process that took six weeks. This was longer than the four weeks initially expected as there were difficulties with acoustics in some focus group venues. Several tapes had to be replayed to ensure accuracy of transcription.

Data reduction

Data was reduced in two ways. NUD*IST was the data management program used to store the large amount of data from the focus groups. This program was chosen because it offers an easy to use interface that handles research projects. NUD*IST searches documents and provides access to quotation, codes and memos (Punch, 1998). A NUD*ST tree was created that grouped the information and shaped the project. Search requests were made to collect data about a topic and then the searches were refined with more selection. For example, when requesting a search for the word "parents" it was evident that this produced an enormous amount of data without much definition. However, if the search was increased to ‘parent communication’ then there was less data but the information was more focused. Themes and topics changed as the data was explored.

To strengthen the results, transcripts were printed out, read and themes identified. Then a matrix display was set up using EXCEL. The number of times that a theme or topic was mentioned was counted and entered. With this number, percentages were worked out based on the number of participants the total group.

Matrix display and examination

A matrix display of the findings was constructed and used to present the results. The display needed to serve the function of providing answers to the research question being asked (Miles & Huberman 1994). It was used to present the data in a framework and most importantly, to show the patterns and explanations that became evident. For the purposes of this research, six columns divided the data into metropolitan and rural participants in the categories of educators, parents and service providers (see Table 4.0 below).
Table 4. Matrix display

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educators N=152</th>
<th>Parents N = 45</th>
<th>Service providers N = 75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metro N=79</td>
<td>Rural N=73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metro N=25</td>
<td>Rural N=20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metro N=58</td>
<td>Rural N=17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As only three students attended the focus groups, there was insufficient data to include them. However, a follow up project relating to students with disabilities and the negotiated curriculum plan, will be conducted by personnel in the Department of Education, Training and Employment in 2002.

Reliability

To maximise reliability, procedures that lead to consistent results were used no matter who moderated the focus groups were used. These included a set of structured questions that were used by all moderators. As well, training was provided and a pack with the same information given to all moderators.

Validity

Validity can be problematic if the data does not relate to what the researcher is describing. The validity of the research design lies in the extent to which it is actually capable of providing the information that it claims to provide (Dyer 1996). For the purposes of this research, content validity can be assessed, by examining the content of the focus group questions, against the intended purpose or aim of the research.

Bias

Researchers must be wary of intentional or unintended bias that can lead to misleading results. The research worker who moderated the focus groups had to be very mindful that personal bias did not lead to manipulation of the group or the answers the participants gave. The technique that was applied to obviate bias in this research was to form a rapport with the group as quickly as possible so that participants relaxed and once they were at ease began to talk. This meant that the moderator could let the group take over, giving less opportunity for bias.

Questions

The data was organised using the questions asked in the focus groups that were as follows:
1. what is the purpose of the negotiated curriculum plan (NCP) Should the NCP be a general summary of curriculum or an outcomes-based working program?
2. do you have any difficulties in the current NCP with process and/or content?
3. what do you believe should be the essential elements of an NCP?
4. what suggestions do you have for the format of the NCP? E.g. hardcopy, CD, website, other?

SUMMARISING THE FINDINGS

The feedback from the NCP focus groups was relevant and powerful because all the members had personal experience of the topic. Either the experience was as the person with the disability, the parent or caregiver who had unique knowledge of the student and are involved in the NCP process, the educators who work with the students or services or agencies who provide expertise and possibly additional funding. To strengthen the findings of the research, the data was matched to the key features found in a range of IEP's, Lucille Eber's Wraparound process and the IEP used in Vermont, USA. This information is presented in Table 5.2 after the advantages and limitations and before the recommendations.
Advantages of focus groups

There were distinct advantages in conducting focus groups that included:

- instant validity because issues could be checked before participants left the meeting
- the issues were real to the participants who were involved because they are key stakeholders in the NCP process
- focus groups gave participants an opportunity to discuss issues in an non-threatening environment
- the researcher was able to ascertain whether the participants understood the questions by using follow-up questions to probe the issues

The focus group consultation required considerable planning and organisation. Despite that, the groups were successful overall and participants were complimentary of the process. They appreciated the opportunity to voice their opinion regarding a process that has been frustrating for some.

Limitations of the Study

Focus groups do have limitations and in this research included:

1. fewer parents than educators participated in the focus groups, therefore, there could be a criticism that the information was 'system dominated'
2. there was difficulty in getting a larger number of students and parents to the focus groups
3. the researcher did not have absolute control over the data produced as it was inevitable that conversation veered off the topic at times, therefore, the moderator needed to be skillful and steer the conversation back when and where appropriate
4. focus groups are not fully confidential or anonymous because the members meet each other and some know each other
5. large amounts of data to be transcribed were quite expensive because it was time consuming. A person was employed to transcribe the data and the process took six weeks rather than four as was originally predicted

The issues that were raised were organised into the table of issues and recommendations below. These will guide the process, content and format of the future NCP. The data from the groups are particularly valuable and should be considered if the changes to the NCP are to be meaningful.

Comparison of desired key features of IEP’s

To strengthen the findings from this research, features from a number of studies were reviewed in order to extract certain features. Although the new NCP must be compatible with the new curriculum in South Australia, it was found that they had certain features in common (see Table 5.4). These studies included the Vermont Family Centred IEP, a selection of national and international IEP's, Lucille Eber’s Wraparound Process and the focus group findings.

The selection of IEP’s included one from each of the following places: USA (California), UK (Hounslow), New Zealand, Western Australia (Wirrabirra and Forest Crescent), Queensland, and the South Australian Guidance Branch (Noarlunga House). There is also a selection of IEP’s from Adelaide North Group of Districts and the McDonald Park Junior Primary School individual Education Plan. The South Australian IEP’s, were given to the researcher by people who attended focus groups. The McDonald Park IEP was particularly interesting as the components matched the most desirable aspects of the work of Eber and the Vermont IEP as well as the findings of the South Australian focus groups.
From the table it can be seen that there is a strong connection between the findings of the research, key features of IEP’s, the Vermont IEP and Lucille Eber’s Wraparound Process. Eber’s Wraparound is not an IEP, but an approach to planning and learning. However, characteristics of Eber’s process should be considered for inclusion in the new NCP document. These include building on strengths and values of the student, measurable outcomes, family access, voice and ownership and encouraging community involvement where appropriate. Inclusion in the new NCP of the key features outlined in the table above should ensure that the resultant document is based on the feedback from the focus groups, key elements from a range of IEP’s, and current literature. It should also serve to ensure that IEP problems encountered made elsewhere do not occur in South Australia.

### Table 5.1 Comparison of desired key features of IEP’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings of the South Australian focus groups</th>
<th>Key features from a selection of IEP’s</th>
<th>Vermont IEP (Schrag 1996)</th>
<th>Lucille Eber’s Wraparound Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>strengths, needs, achievements and interests</td>
<td>strengths, needs and achievements</td>
<td>strengths and needs</td>
<td>build on the unique values, strengths, and social and racial characteristics of children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a single summary page</td>
<td>single page format</td>
<td>a new “non-form”- 3 blank columns - 1 for each key question</td>
<td>outcomes must be measured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there must be accountability for the NCP</td>
<td>evaluation accountability indicators of success</td>
<td>strategies to achieve a direct link between present levels of performance, services, goals and objectives</td>
<td>the process must be implemented on an interagency basis and owned by the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the NCP must become more educationally meaningful</td>
<td>team includes parents, teachers, facilitators and community members</td>
<td>a holistic approach to enhance the IEP’s educational relevance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a clearly articulated process in jargon free, simple and specific language</td>
<td>clear processes in simple uncomplicated language</td>
<td>common jargon-free language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>include and value parents and students in the process</td>
<td>core and extended team to include the parents and student.</td>
<td>a creative problem solving process to promote participation by all team members</td>
<td>family access, voice and ownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a clear, consistent process and transition checklist</td>
<td>clear checklist of processes</td>
<td>a checklist to ensure that legal requirements are satisfied.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations**

For the purposes of this report, the recommendations were set out below in Tables 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 under the headings of content/format, process and support.
### Table 5.2 Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content/format</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>The NCP needs to: be reviewed regularly; be outcomes-based; encourage teachers to take ownership for student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The NCP needs to: be simplified with less paperwork; ensure compatibility with SACSA’ determine long and short term goals; use language that is jargon free, practical, specific and simple; include a list of special centres, support services and other supports available; document teaching and management strategies that have worked or are not working for the student; reflect students’ strengths, needs, achievements and interests; document what assessments will be used; document other relevant information; explore the interface with competency assessments to enhance the employability of students with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>The NCP needs to: be simplified with less paperwork; ensure compatibility with SACSA’ determine long and short term goals; use language that is jargon free, practical, specific and simple; include a list of special centres, support services and other supports available; document teaching and management strategies that have worked or are not working for the student; reflect students’ strengths, needs, achievements and interests; document what assessments will be used; document other relevant information; explore the interface with competency assessments to enhance the employability of students with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Format</td>
<td>The NCP needs to: be a simple learning needs framework allowing for the different needs of students; include physical access and curriculum assessments will be used be available as a CDROM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations</td>
<td>In the NCP process: subject/classroom teachers must not leave the responsibility of the NCP to the special education teacher; realistic possibilities of what can and can't be done should be frankly discussed with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>Connections made between reporting, the curriculum and the NCP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent issues</td>
<td>The NCP should: use practical language with less jargon; include and value parents in the process; provide more information about how parents can help at home ; include the provision of a parent brochure or booklet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds including Aboriginal and Anangu</td>
<td>There should be: translation of an explanation of the plan into other languages a pamphlet in different languages outlining the NCP process and available services more space in the NCP to talk about the student's background, abilities in their own countries and the psychological aspect of the student.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 5.3 Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The NCP process</td>
<td>In the NCP process there should be: clarification of the process and its legal position consistent process information for educators, parents and students a simple, generic process checklist flexibility to meet the needs of different students provision by schools for release time to complete the process a complaint mechanism as a way of improving practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent and student involvement</td>
<td>The NCP process should: include and inform parents and students ensure students are involved in the process encourage regular meetings with parents and establish good communication links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary schools</td>
<td>Awareness of the NCP process should enable involvement in primary to secondary transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designation of management</td>
<td>The NCP should: clarify roles and responsibilities assist school personnel to prioritise resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>The NCP should: address accountability assist in identifying curriculum priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>The NCP should provide a: transition checklist information shared from site to site document roles and responsibilities in the transition process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds including Aboriginal and Anangu</td>
<td>The NCP should recognise the need for: schools to be aware of the availability of Guidance Officers for people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds a bilingual support worker to attend the NCP meetings for the purposes of translating and reporting parents to be asked if the student has any health issues or disabilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.4 Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training and development</td>
<td>There is the opportunity for training of: principals, pre-service and in-service teachers, parents and agencies, teachers on the tribal lands in the North of South Australia and include information on the NCP in the induction of new teachers, online training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourcing</td>
<td>Schools need to allocate sufficient resources for the development of the NCP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds including Aboriginal and Anangu</td>
<td>The NCP should recognise the need for: interpreters who are freely available and have a background in disability involvement of translators and MMALSA (advocates for people with a disability from other cultures) information about nationality group networks recognition in the NCP of the problems associated with torture and trauma.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further research

Further research topics include:

1. more detailed research of the perspective of Aboriginal and Anangu parents, teachers, workers and students on the lands, in country towns and in the metropolitan area in relation to the NCP
2. the NCP and cultural perspectives
3. the effect on student learning of the new NCP
4. the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA), constructivism and the NCP
5. students and their involvement in the NCP
6. the professional development needs of parents and school councils in the NCP.

These topics will be prioritised and addressed by personnel in Student and Professional Services in 2001.

CONCLUSION

The use of focus groups as the method of data collection revealed insights and understandings relating to the current and future NCP as participants spoke candidly about the real experiences they had with it.

Three things are abundantly clear from the findings of this research. One is that the information from the focus groups will be pivotal in the formation of the future NCP in South Australia. Second is the value of the process of consulting in this way. Stakeholders appreciated being asked their opinion about current and future practice. The large degree of agreement about many issues was quite striking. The third is the number of issues that have been uncovered and will be explored.

Education plans for students with learning needs are key documents for providing curriculum access and participation, including special education services that underpin student achievement. It was important to listen to the voices from the field as well as others directly concerned in the NCP process. Focus groups were an economical and appropriate way of doing this. Not only was it important to listen, but also to consider the literature in relation to
education plans, so that the problems of narrowness and prescriptiveness inherent in the education plans of USA and UK are not repeated in South Australia.

This review has the potential to change the way that key stakeholders view and use the plan for students special learning needs, and shows that there is a considerable amount of agreement about the new direction. The new document should address student strengths and needs, accountability and parent and student involvement in a simple format that has clear, consistent processes. Cultural and linguistic issues and needs should also be taken into account. If these things are achieved, then the objective of this research has been reached. The NCP will have been reviewed and renewed in line with focus group feedback and current literature, incorporating aspects of student/family centred processes such as the Wraparound. The next stage of the NCP process is to design a functional, meaningful document for students with special learning needs in South Australia.

REFERENCES


Edelen-Smith, P. (1995) Qualitative determinants for collaborative goal setting on the IEP. Department of Special Education, University of Hawaii at Manoa.


