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School counselors' views about the individualized educational program practices

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyze elementary school counselors' views about the individualized educational program. This is a descriptive research that based on a survey and interviews. A questionnaire consists of 18 questions about the implementation of individualized education programs were administered to 45 school counselors from different districts of Istanbul. According to research findings, school counselors found themselves inadequate for the individualized education program applications. They also noted that teachers' knowledge about inclusive education process was inadequate and the number of supporting staff was insufficient. Moreover, the booklet suggested by The Ministry of Education for the individualized education program does not provide valid and appropriate information for the teachers. Therefore, the learning environment in the schools and support services for individualized educational program should be improved for better implementation.

Keywords: Individualized education program, curriculum development, school counseling.

1. Introduction

Every child has the right to receive free and appropriate education. Education of students with disabilities is very important for this reason. Disadvantaged children receive a quality education is also important in terms of equality of opportunity. To achieve this, a series of planned training practices is needed. Individualized education program comes at the beginning of these applications. "The individualized education program or IEP, is the result of an essential process to ensure that individuals with disabilities have appropriate educational planning to accommodate their unique instructional needs, and that these needs are met in an appropriate learning environment" (North Dakota State Guideline for IEP Planning , 1999, p. 10). The IEP is of critical importance to educators, parents, and students. It serves the purpose of directing and monitoring all aspects of a student's special education program. The IEP document contains the educational needs of a student, the measurable annual goals that direct his or her program, the special education programming and placement, and the method of data collection that will be used to monitor and report the student's progress (Christle and Yell, 2010).

In 1997, Turkish Ministry of Education recognized the need for some regulations for special education and in the year of 2000, the ministry published a series of regulations about special education such that the principles of educating the disabled children, and their schooling process and the essence of individualized education program are

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identified clearly (Kargin, 2007). Determination of the students and their families who need individualized education program is the starting point. The next stage is to create IEP units. While preparing IEP, planning should come after a rigorous evaluation. According to Kargin (2007) for an IEP following components must be included: Documentation of the student's current level of performance; Short-term objectives; Procedures and schedules for evaluating goals and objectives; Documentation of particular special education services that will be provided for the student; Documentation of particular related services if any, that will be provided for the student; Projected dates for initiating services and anticipated duration services. As a consequence, assessment and IEP process is a legal requirement for Turkey. These processes are needed to provide educational support for the disabled-individuals in a systematic fashion. In the USA, as Smith (1990) stated, the purpose of the multidisciplinary IEP team meeting is the production of the IEP document. In this document all the assessment data are formulated into a comprehensive planning system that facilitates the delivery of educational services. This means that parents, teachers, other professionals and pupils should collaboratively identify the nature of the help which a child requires and should develop a program as a team. In addition, they should identify the services of intervention that are more appropriate; formulate the function of these services and then monitor and evaluate the development of the program as a team (Strogilos, & Xanthacou, 2006). In the Turkey, the IEP development team members are the school's or the institution's principal or vice principal, the special education teacher, the counselor, a teacher appointed to prepare training programs, the student's classroom teacher, the teachers of each course, the parents and the student. For the success of IEP, the IEP team should work in cooperation. Therefore, as a member of the IEP team school counselors' knowledge and attitudes about IEP, their skills, and observations are important.

School counselors, by the nature of their commitment to serve all students, are in an excellent position for influencing the outcomes on behalf of college bound special education students (Roberts, Bouknight, & Karan, 2010). Milsom (2002) examined the role that school counselors play in the academic lives of students with disabilities by conducting a survey study with the intent of determining: (a) the activities that school counselors engage in related to students with disabilities; (b) school counselors' level of preparedness to perform these activities; and (c) trends in school counselor education programs in training school counselors to work effectively with students with disabilities. Results demonstrate that school counselors perform many activities with students with disabilities. School counselors are responsible for the arrangement of educational environment for students that need of special education. Therefore, they are more sensitive to the source of problems and issues. School counselors' observations of the application process should be used to evaluate IEP.

Aim of the study

The purpose of this research is to analyze elementary school guidance counselors' views about the individualized educational program. For this purpose, the answers of the following questions were sought:

1. What are school counselors' opinions about the implementation of the individualized education programs?
2. What are the problems encountered during the implementation individualized education programs and what are school counselors' suggestions for the solution?

2. Methods

2.1. Study Group

Survey method was used in this research since the aim was to determine school counselors' opinions about IEP. The research was conducted with 45 school counselors from different districts of Istanbul. The characteristics of the study group are shown in Table 1.

2.2 Instrument

The survey consisted of two parts. In the first part of the survey school counselors were asked to fill out their personal information (gender, training etc.). In the second part the counselors were expected to answer 18 questions about IEP practices. Two open-ended questions were illustrated at the end of the second part such that the counselors were asked to write about one of the most important problems they experienced during IEP and their suggestions for the solution of such problems.

Table 1. The characteristics of study group

Gender	f	%
Male	12	26,6
Female	33	73,3
IEP	f	
Implementing	31	68,8
Not Implementing	14	31,1
Co-operation with special education teacher	f	25,6
Yes	11	75,5
No	34	
Training related to IEP	f	48,8
Undergraduate	22	28,8
In-service training	13	11,1
Individual training	5	8,8
No training	4	25,6

3. Findings

3.1. What are school counselors' opinions about the implementation of the individualized education programs?

The opinions of school counselors on the implementation of the individualized education programs were examined and the findings have been shown in Table 2. The findings revealed that as the IEP team member the school counselors found IEP applications inadequate. (11, % 86,6). This result can be interpreted as school counselors' awareness about the quality of IEP implementation. It was also found that counselors perceived the members of IEP team inadequate to carry out IEP process (13, %75,5). They thought that family involvement in IEP practices was inadequate (110, % 68,8) and learning environment was not appropriate for IEP implementation (113, % 80,0). In addition, school counselors indicated that there were not enough tools and materials to apply IEP although materials are crucial in IEP. (15 %82,0). Although school counselors' opinions about IEP applications were mostly negative, they were highly motivated towards implementing IEP (17 % 77,7) and they believe the benefits of IEP (118 % 88,8).

Table 2. The findings of the survey items

Items	Totally Agree	Agree	Neither Agree-Nor Disagree	Disagree	Totally Disagree
	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
I1. The IEP applications in my school are adequate.	- 0,0	2 4,4	4 8,8	10 22,2	29 64,44
I2. The frequency of IEP meetings is appropriate.	7 15,5	9 20,0	4 8,8	15 33,3	13 28,8
I3. The school staffs that are responsible for IEP applications are qualified to do so.	- 0,0	8 17,7	3 6,6	10 22,2	24 53,3
I4. I am knowledgeable enough to participate in IEP.	2 4,4	4 8,8	6 13,3	17 37,7	18 40,0
I5. In my school, there are necessary materials and instructional tools for IEP applications.	2 4,4	3 6,6	3 6,6	21 46,6	16 35,5
I6. In my school, the number of the staffs working in the support service for IEP applications is adequate.	2 4,4	2 4,4	4 8,8	9 20,0	30 66,6

17. I feel motivated to work for IEP.	21 46,6	14 31,1	7 15,5	10 22,2	4 8,8
18. In my school, teachers implement IEP in a way that it is intended.	- 0,0	4 8,8	5 11,1	11 25,6	25 55,5
19. IEP applications are supported by administrators.	4 8,8	7 15,5	10 22,2	8 17,7	16 35,5
110. The participation of families in IEP applications is adequately enough.	2 4,4	8 17,7	4 8,8	18 40,0	13 28,8
111. IEP applications are conveyed in a multidisciplinary fashion.	- 0,0	- 0,0	8 17,7	12 26,6	25 55,5
112. Students' needs are taken into consideration when preparing IEP.	6 13,3	8 17,7	11 25,6	10 22,2	10 22,2
113. In my school the educational environment for IEP applications is appropriate.	2 4,4	3 6,6	5 11,1	13 28,8	23 51,1
114. I think IEP monitoring and assessment studies are carried out properly.	3 6,6	4 8,8	6 13,3	15 33,3	17 37,7
115. I think IEP is a list of suggestions on a paper-it is not really applied.	12 26,6	15 33,3	8 17,7	4 8,8	6 13,3
116. The school counselors are given enough inservice training about IEP.	- 0,0	- 0,0	4 8,8	13 28,8	28 62,2
117. Curriculum developers and special education specialists should take a part when preparing and applying IEP in schools.	- 0,0	- 0,0	4 8,8	6 13,3	35 77,7
118. I believe the benefits of IEP.	22 48,8	18 40,0	10 22,2	3 6,6	2 4,4

3.2. What are the problems encountered during the implementation individualized education programs and what are school counselors' suggestions for the solution?

The counselors were given two open-ended questions such that the counselors were asked to write about one of the most important problems they experienced during IEP and their suggestions for the solution of such problems. Their responses were categorized and the frequency of such responses was noted. The list is given in Table 3.

Table 3. Problems and their solutions for IEP applications

Most Important Problems	f	%
Teachers' lack of interest	28	62,2
Lack of special education teacher	14	31,1
Class size	15	33,3
Lack of collaboration with family	16	35,5
Lack of resource room and equipment	11	24,4
Recommendations	f	%
In service education	36	80,0
Personnel support	21	46,6
Creation of a special sub-classes	5	11,1
Increase teachers' motivation	4	8,8

Sixty-two percent of 45 school counselors stated that the main problem is the lack of interest of teachers. The reason for teachers' disinterest may be related to lack of information provided about inclusive education during the teacher education. Therefore, school counselors suggested in-service training (N=36) as an immediate solution to this problem. The interviews supported these findings. Lack of teachers' interest and lack of in service education about special education are emphasized as the most important problem related to IEP. Also they indicated that they felt

inadequate in special education and IEP applications too. In addition they addressed special issues related to families. They argued that the integration of families should be provided with the IEP applications and school.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The individualized education programs are very important for the future of disadvantaged students and society. To attain the goals of individualized education programs, more collaboration and rigorous study is required. The research findings support Etscheidt's (2003) findings. She recommended that (a) IEP goals needs to be matched to evaluation data and student needs, (b) IEP team members need to be qualified to develop IEPs, and (b) the special education programming included in students' IEPs must be suitable to meet student's educational needs and result in educational progress (Etscheidt, 2003). This research findings also overlaps with the research that conducted by Diker Coşkun (2009) et.al, their survey on classroom teachers of using styles and development of inclusive education materials. The most important result of the research, teachers need to get a professional support from psychologists and special education specialists. Specifically, in this research the importance of teachers and other support staff working as a team emerged. An ideal IEP should include cognitive, social and psychological features. To improve student preparation of the real life these features and their preparation by the experts is important. As a suggestion, special education specialists should be more employed in the schools for the IEP application. Finally, it is essential that teachers, administrators and school counselors to be more sensitive, cooperative and devoted to the IEP implications.

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