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An Analysis of Individual Education Programmes (IEPs) in Saudi Arabia Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model: Barriers and Solutions

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Abstract

The implementation of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) for children with intellectual disabilities was investigated at mainstream boys' schools in Riyadh. Qualitative data collected from interviews with 20 IEP team members, supplemented by content analysis of documentary data from a key policy document, provide rare insights into the practices and perspectives of the IEP teams working in mainstream Saudi schools. A clear discrepancy was identified between the Regulations of Special Education Institutes and Programmes (RSEIP) policy document and its implementation. Team members were also found to be unsure of their individual roles stipulated by the RSEIP document and were therefore not fulfilling these duties. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory enables analysis of child development at different levels of society, affecting the implementation of IEPs and informing strategies to overcome barriers to implementation. This framework highlights discrepancies between policy and practice, and the major barriers to IEP implementation: parental involvement; structural support; negative attitudes; and school level. This demonstrates that development in policy and practice is required in five major areas: building collaborative teamwork; legal and administrative matters; appropriate assessment; curriculum development; and the coordination between the MoE, DGSE, mainstream schools and parents in relation to IEPs.

Terms Keys: IEPs Challenges and Solutions, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model.

تحليل البرامج التربوية الفردية في المملكة العربية السعودية بواسطة النموذج البيئي : المعوقات والحلول

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ملخـص

هدفت هذه الدراسة الى التحقيق في تنفيذ البرامج التربوية الفردية (IEPs) للأطفال ذوي الإعاقة الفكرية في مدارس الدمج في مدينة الرياض. أستخدمت هذة الدراسة الطريقة النوعية التي تم جمعها من خلال المقابلات مع ٢٠ عضوا من فريق IEP، وكذلك تم استخدام تحليل المحتوي للقواعد التنظيمية لمعاهد وبرامج التربية الخاصة (RSIEP) وذلك بهدف تقديم رؤى واضحة للممارسات الميدانية ومعرفة أراء فريق IEPs في مدارس الدمج . تؤكد هذة الدراسة أن هناك قصور واضح بين هذة السياسة (RSIEP) وطريقة تنفيذها. وكشفت الدراسة أن أعضاء فريق IEPs غير متأكدين من أدوارهم الفردية المنصوص عليها في القواعد التنظيمية كلا على حسب مسوؤليتة وبالتالي لم تفي بهذه المهام. استخدمت هذة الدراسة النظرية البيئية (Bronfenbrenner,١٩٧٩) التي تكون قادرة على تحليل تنمية الطفل في مستويات مختلفة من المجتمع، مما يؤثر على تنفيذ IEP وإبلاغ استراتيجيات التغلب على العوائق التي تحول دون تطبيقها. هذة النظرية تسلط الضوء على العوامل التي تحول دون تنفيذ IEPs: مشاركة الوالدين ؛ الدعم الهيكلي؛ الاتجاهات السلبية وعلى مستوى المدرسة. هذا يدل على أن التنمية في السياسات والممارسات المطلوبة تكون في خمسة مجالات هي: بناء فريق العمل الجماعي؛ المسائل القانونية والإدارية؛ التقييم المناسب؛ تطوير المناهج الدراسية والتنسيق بين وزارة التعليم، الامانة العامة للتربية الخاصة ؛ مدارس الدمج وأولياء الأمور فيما يتعلق بتطبيق البرامج الفردية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: معوقات وحلول البرامج التربوية الفردية و النموذج البيئي.

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Introduction

The term 'special educational needs' (SEN) emerged from the language and philosophy of the Warnock Report (Department for Education and Science [DES], 1978) to describe a wide spectrum of difficulties that hinder students from attaining their maximum potential at school (Stakes and Hornby, 2000). SEN is typically used to denote students who experience difficulties, incorporating those with visual or hearing impairments or intellectual disabilities, as well as students with dyslexia, those who are gifted, or who have behavioural and/or emotional problems (Hornby, 1998).

The global development of special education has seen the design and widespread adoption of Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), bespoke documents that specify the education services required by a child with special needs, including their goals and any requirements for assessment and evaluation (Al-Khashrami, 2001). The status of IEPs as a global phenomenon has been well documented in the works of several scholars (e.g. Fred, 1986; Riddell and Brown, 1994; Smith and Hilton, 1994; Rodger, 1995; Slee, 1998; Brookshire and Klotz, 2002; Fredrickson et al., 2004; Prunty, 2011; Andreasson et al., 2013). The preparation of these plans involves the participation of an integrated team of interested parties. An IEP potentially serves as an organisational and directional force to promote an educational system that is more child-centred and diverse, and therefore more inclusive. This has led many developed countries to promulgate laws and regulations under which mainstream schools are obliged to prepare an IEP for every child who requires special education and support services (Al-Wabli, 2000).

In the Saudi context, special education has been recognised as being distinct from the education of mainstream students, in terms of the diverse strategies, methods and ideas involved (ibid.). The IEP is recognised as being particularly crucial in the development of special education, particularly with regard to intellectual disability, constituting the basis of all educational and teaching activities for students with disabilities (Al-Otaibi, 2012). Significant changes have been made in the educational provision for special needs students in Saudi Arabia. Traditionally, Saudi students with SEN attended one of the three kinds of special schools', each of which offers specialised provision for hearing impaired, visually impaired, and intellectually disabled students (Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education [MoE], 2002). However, in an effort to promote more integrated and less segregated schooling, the MoE has more recently implemented a policy document to promote mainstream public schools as the most suitable educational setting for students with SEN. This was published as the Regulations of Special Education Institutes and Programmes (RSEIP) (ibid), the application of which is mandatory for both special and mainstreaming schools. The RSEIP policy document defines an IEP as 'a written statement of all educational and support services required to meet the needs of each student with disabilities on the basis of diagnosis and analogy, and prepared by a team working in the educational institution' (ibid: 79).

Official legislation and policy seeks to uphold and highlight the importance of IEPs, as stated in the regulations issued by the Directorate General of Special Education (DGSE). The DGSE stresses the

importance of collaboration in an attempt to ensure the development of IEPs in a manner that best serves the educational process and the interests of students with special needs. This cooperation among IEP team members is recognised as being essential for the effective delivery of IEPs for students with SEN in mainstream schools (Ysseldyke et al., 2000; Gargiulo, 2003; Yell, 2006; Hulett, 2009). The IEP is also used to meet the needs of students with SEN in special and public schools in the Saudi context, ensuring the provision of appropriate special educational programmes and other relevant support services for students with SEN and their families (Hawsawi, 2002). Additionally, the plan enables the inclusion of students with SEN in special and mainstream schools (Al-Mousa, 2005), including such considerations as making the environment more accessible for all students. However, the experience of the researchers and Saudi literature in this field (e.g. Abdullah, 2003; Hanafi, 2005; Al-Herz, 2008), shows that the existing practice does not meet the required standards, indicating the existence of a research problem and of potential obstacles to the implementation of IEPs as stipulated in the policy.

This is consistent with the researcher's personal experience of dealing with students with intellectual disabilities, supported by field visits to mainstream schools (as a teacher in mainstream schools for approximately nine years and as a lecturer at King Saud University in Riyadh for another two). The following sections state the problem identified, the conceptual framework, the research aims, the rationale and the research questions, in addition to a discussion of the significance of the study.

Statement of the Problem

The IEP is recognised as being a crucial milestone in the development of special education, particularly with regards to intellectual disability, as it constitutes the basis of all educational and teaching activities for students with disabilities (Al-Otaibi, 2012). From an educational perspective, an IEP can be defined as 'a written statement of all educational and support services required to meet the needs of each student with disabilities on the basis of diagnosis and analogy, and prepared by a team working in the educational institution' (MoE, 2002:79).

As mentioned in the previous section, the RSEIP policy document (MoE, 2002) explains the nature of IEPs, their components and how IEP team members should engage in their preparation and implementation. The experience of the researcher in this field suggests that a decade after the publication of the policy, IEP implementation within the Saudi educational system is undertaken almost exclusively by the teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, operating in the absence of clear definitions of the roles and contributions of other team members who should be involved, such as head teachers, psychologists, counsellors and fathers (MoE, 2002). Therefore, there was a need to conduct research in order to ascertain whether these observations could be verified on a wider scale and to consider the potential impact on the educational process. Articles 54 and 55 of the Education Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (EPKSA) refer to providing appropriate educational care for students with Intellectual Disabilities (ID) within the

framework of knowledge and taking account of individual differences among them (MoE, 1995:14). Al-Wabli (2000) states that although decision makers and people interested in the field of special education in Saudi Arabia have increasingly prioritised the adoption and application of IEPs, there is no concrete practice in terms of the actual implementation of the Special Education Policy. Al-Khashrami (2001) concurs that many special education schools in Saudi Arabia do not adhere to policy recommendations on IEP practice, although the regulations stipulate clear rules for their implementation. In particular, the RSEIP policy document (2002) affirms the need for implementation of the IEP by a team. Article 22 of the policy states:

> *'All members of the special education programme in mainstream schools should carry out the assigned tasks and responsibilities and co-operate effectively to ensure the goals of the educational process, as declared in the Education Policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia' (MoE, 2002:44).*

The DGSE therefore stresses the importance of collaboration to ensure that IEPs are developed in a manner that best serves the educational process and the interests of students with special needs. The literature suggests that the effective delivery of IEPs for students with SEN in mainstream schools depends on cooperation and coordination among IEP team members (Ysseldyke et al., 2000; Gargiulo, 2003; Yell, 2006; Hulett, 2009). The involvement of a team can facilitate the learning process and present the best special education services for students with SEN (Tod et al., 1998). In the Saudi context, Hawsawi (2002) believes that the IEP is used to meet the needs of students with

SEN in special and public schools. It is considered to be the essence of the special education process, ensuring the provision of appropriate special educational programmes and other relevant support services for students with SEN and their families. Additionally, the plan enables students with SEN to be included in special and mainstream schools (Al-Mousa, 2005), including such considerations as the actions required in order to make the environment more accessible for all students.

However, the experience of the researchers and Saudi literature in this field (e.g. Abdullah, 2003; Hanafi, 2005; Al-Herz, 2008), shows that the existing practice does not meet the required standards, indicating the existence of a research problem and of potential obstacles to the implementation of IEPs as stipulated in the policy. This area therefore requires investigation. The difficulties which face IEP teams in mainstream schools may have a range of adverse effects upon the performance of the teams, such as affecting their work flexibility and team spirit, with a corresponding reduction in the effectiveness of special education provision. Furthermore, if team members lack knowledge of, or commitment to, the relevant rules, regulations and related tasks assigned to them, there may be a detrimental effect on the quality of education delivered to students in those schools. This study is founded on the premise that solutions to these issues may lead to a smoother learning process and the provision of better services for students with intellectual disabilities. For this reason, the current study describes the main roles of Saudi IEP team members, including SEN teachers, head teachers, psychologists, counsellors and fathers of (male) students with SEN. It should be noted here that this focus on fathers is necessitated by the strictures of Saudi culture and religion, which prohibit mothers from

interacting directly with the school staff and therefore with the (male) IEP team. It explores the challenges faced by IEP team members in the implementation of IEPs for students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream boys' primary schools in Riyadh and endeavours to propose solutions to these challenges.

Research Aims and Rationale

This study explores the strengths of IEP policy in Saudi Arabia and obstacles to its implementation, in order to increase the effectiveness of educational policy and practice in that country. In order to achieve this aim, the study:

- Investigates the experiences and perspectives of key agents (teachers, head teachers, psychologists, counsellors and fathers) regarding their roles and duties in developing and implementing IEPs designed for students with intellectual disabilities at mainstream schools;
- Explores key agents perspectives on the effectiveness of existing practice and key challenges faced;
- Explores the findings through the theoretical lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory.

This paper examines the respective roles of the various team members in the implementation of IEPs, specifically for intellectually disabled students at mainstream boys' primary schools in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. It explores the reflections of team members on IEP practice and their perception of barriers, utilising the outcomes to generate possible solutions. This study was conducted in Riyadh for the

reason that this city is where the policy of mainstreaming for students with ID was first implemented in the Kingdom.

Research Questions

This research was informed by the following three salient questions, which have emerged from gaps in the literature in the Saudi context and which are rooted in the experience of practitioners within the field:

1- How do the following IEP team members describe their roles and duties as regards the implementation of the plans for children with intellectual disabilities at mainstream boys' schools in Riyadh?
2- What do the following team members consider to be the barriers to implementing IEPs for children with intellectual disabilities within mainstream boys' primary schools in Riyadh?
3- 3. What do the following IEP team members consider to be possible and reasonable solutions to overcome barriers to implementing IEPs for children with intellectual disabilities at mainstream boys' primary schools in Riyadh?

Significance of the Study

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study of current IEP practice in Saudi Arabian schools. This interpretivist paradigm has been used to great effect by other researchers studying the impact of legislation in education, according to Al-Jadidi (2012:95), who argues that qualitative research is 'more appropriate to personal and social reality'. Creswell describes the qualitative approach as

> *'...an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants and conducts the study in a natural setting' (1998:15).*

This study is significant for the fact that qualitative studies of mainstream schools are exceedingly rare in the Saudi context, even in the capital city of Riyadh. Gaining access to those working in schools with students with SEN has enabled an exploration of the IEPs in terms of constraints and solutions as perceived by Saudi IEP team members, relayed through in-depth discussion of their experience. As this study is the first qualitative study of special education needs and IEPs to be conducted in Saudi Arabia, its outcomes may be used to inform future research into related lines of enquiry. A review of the literature demonstrates that the majority of existing research on IEPs in Saudi Arabia has been quantitative, relying heavily on the use of descriptive statistics. The findings of such studies suggest that teachers of the intellectually disabled and educational supervisors at the MoE believe that neither mainstreaming nor special education schools in Saudi Arabia are fully committed to implementing IEPs (Al-Khashrami, 2001). This is seen as a failure to translate legislation and policy into practice in schools. This study uses qualitative data to enrich these existing findings, through an in depth examination the perceptions of IEP team members on the practice of IEP implementation and challenges to its success.

In one earlier quantitative study, Abdullah (2003) investigated significant issues regarding the provision of IEPs for students with intellectual disabilities in the south of Saudi Arabia. He reports that identification of the potential educational support needs of such students, formal evaluation of the child and the achievement goals in the IEP were usually carried out by teachers of students with intellectual disabilities,, at both special and mainstream schools, without the effective involvement or collaboration of the parents and other school professionals. This paper investigates this complex web of interactions through the use of the ecological model proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979).

It should be noted that IEPs and barriers to their implementation have been more comprehensively studied in the developed world than in less developed countries, due to factors that include greater funding and the greater importance given to policies for children with special needs (Al-Wabli, 2000). Nevertheless, barriers in both mainstream and special schools, as determined by special education teachers in Saudi Arabia, have been investigated by Hanafi (2005) and Al-Herz (2008). Hanafi (2005) found that teachers of hearing impaired students faced specific difficulties in the implementation of IEPs, compounded by a lack of diversity in the IEP teams for deaf students. However, his study did not examine the roles and duties of IEP team members regarding the implementation of the plans for students with ID. Therefore, this study investigates the perspectives of IEP team members regarding their primary roles and duties with regards to IEP implementation. According

to Al-Herz (2008), who evaluated the achievement of aims of the IEP in special education and mainstream schools in Riyadh, teachers of students with intellectual disabilities had a wide range of views on IEP strategies and their implementation. However, her study did not involve any empirical exploration of the individual roles of special education teachers in implementing IEPs, nor did it examine the perceptions of IEP team members regarding key challenges and solutions. Crucially, none of these studies set in Saudi Arabia has investigated IEP practice in terms of the implementation of the RSEIP policy document. Indeed, contrary to the stipulations of the RSEIP, these studies have reinforced the idea that the teacher has the key (or sole) responsibility for IEP implementation in mainstream schools.

It is hoped that the findings of this academic endeavour will raise knowledge and increase understanding of the roles and tasks of IEP team members in the Saudi context. As noted above, qualitative research into any aspect of education set in Saudi Arabia is relatively rare, which highlights the value of conducting such research in this region. Indeed, given the relative paucity of studies conducted in Arab-Islamic contexts (Al-Jadidi, 2012), this research may therefore constitute a major contribution to this field. Furthermore, it aims to increase the global knowledge and understanding of the issues affecting the application of IEPs and the broader topic of mainstreaming schools. It will also necessarily contribute to the ongoing debate about SEN, ID and IEPs. At a national level, it is hoped that the findings of this research will be useful in helping Saudi educational policymakers to develop more formal and binding guidelines to support better IEP practice in Saudi

Arabia. It is further hoped that its findings will help all concerned in mainstream schools (parents, teachers, specialists and professionals) to gain more knowledge of how their individual roles can contribute to a better IEP process and improved educational outcomes.

In short, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature on IEP implementation, to inform the work of Saudi educational policymakers and to suggest ways to improve participation by individual IEP team members in implementing IEPs for students with intellectual disabilities.

Definition of Terms

This section provides definitions of a number of key terms utilised in this study.

Special educational needs

The SENCP (DfES, 2001:6) defines a special educational need as 'a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made'. Another Saudi definition was recently introduced, which includes classifications of dissimilarities between students with special education needs and other students.

Intellectual disability

This paper adopts the definition of an intellectual disability used by Lukasson et al. (2002:8), which is 'a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before age 18'.

Regulations of Special Education Institutes and Programmes

The RSEIP document (MoE, 2002) sets out a policy with a set of principles, procedures, rules and conditions. Issued by the DGSE, this policy governs the working processes in special education institutions and mainstream schools for the purpose of providing better services for students with SEN.

Individualised educational plan

In the Saudi context, an IEP is defined as 'a written description of all additional educational services required to meet the needs of each student with SEN based on the results of the diagnosis and measurement and prepared by an IEP team in the school' (MoE, 2002:19).

Mainstreaming programme

Mainstreaming programmes involve the provision of academic and non-academic services for students with intellectual disabilities at mainstream schools, i.e. those which deliver general education services to non-disabled students (Al-Wabli, 2000:199). At mainstream boys' schools within Riyadh, students with ID are in a separate class all day.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This paper reviews the theoretical and empirical literature pertinent to the current research, beginning with the use of IEPs for students with special needs, the challenges to their implementation and proposed solutions to these, in the light of relevant theoretical concepts. Also, it sets out the theoretical framework adopted by the researcher, based closely on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory. This theory

is a useful lens for exploring the implementation and evaluation of IEPs and therefore guides the current study.

Challenges to Successful IEP Implementation

In the current study, the terms ‘challenge, ‘obstacle, ‘hindrance’ and ‘barrier’ are used interchangeably. Although this section refers to research into many different categories of SEN, the implementation and principles of IEPs are the same. The literature suggests that there are key factors which present challenges to IEP team members implementing IEPs in mainstream schools, affecting their roles, their tasks and the quality of outcomes in special needs education that are achieved. The present research is particularly concerned with the views of IEP team members about barriers to their implementation of IEPs and solutions to these obstacles. This section reviews the literature on such challenges, concerning first the duties of the different IEP team members, then the involvement of parents. Each hindrance is examined with regard to possible solutions that would support IEP teamwork and sustain better parental participation.

Challenges Involving IEP Team Members

Writing from an American perspective, Christle and Yell (2010:113) assert that ‘since their inception in 1975, IEPs have been fraught with problems and have failed to live up to their original promise’. In recent years, there have been many factors which limit the implementation of IEPs (Rodger, 1995). This means that whilst the IEP is an essential strategy for the education and training of students with

SEN, through which the codification and documentation of their needs are carried out to ensure the provision of special educational services appropriate for them, it still faces challenges as regards implementation (Gerber et al., 1986). Obstacles to the implementation of IEPs involving teachers of SEN include the failure to determine the child's needs poor knowledge of IEPs and a lack of understanding of special education policy. Failure to understand the IEP concept can be an obstacle to the teacher in effectively assessing the individual needs of children. For example, the US Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which passed in 1975, did not achieve the desired outcomes, because there were many obstacles to both the preparation and application of IEPs (Whitworth, 1994). Scholars have continued to describe significant confusion among teachers concerning IEP implementation (Luckasson et al., 2007). A study in Mississippi by Brookshire and Klotz (2002) found that general education teachers did not score well on knowledge of how IEPs should be implemented. In South Korea, Paik and Healey (1999) conducted a similar study to explore awareness levels among special education teachers of the services provided for students with special educational needs at the pre-school stage. It found that there were too many services of this kind and that there was a lack of clarity among teachers about what IEPs involved and how to apply them to the teaching of students with special needs. Elsewhere in East Asia, Lins and Miller (2003) assessed the extent to which special education teachers in Taiwanese primary schools were knowledgeable about laws regarding special education. They report that these teachers typically had minimal knowledge of the legislation, but were deeply convinced that special

education students needed more help to address their issues. Furthermore, the scope of research in the field of special education was found to be extremely limited in the case of Taiwan (Lins and Miller, 2003).

In the Saudi context, Abdul-Jabbar (2004) studied the level of job satisfaction among general and special education teachers in public primary schools in Riyadh. There were statistically significant differences between the responses of the general education teachers and their counterparts in special education, with the former showing higher levels of dissatisfaction than the latter. Clearly, teachers had inadequate knowledge of IEPs. On the subject of role definition, Leyla and Tevhide (2009) found that special education teachers were often the only person responsible for applying the IEP, while other team members showed little awareness of how they could contribute effectively during meetings held at different stages of the IEP programme. Therefore, the present study is concerned with better definitions of these complementary roles and the distinct contributions that different team members can make. In order to accomplish this goal, the duty of each team member ought to be outlined and a definitive list of behaviours established (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Lytle and Bordin's (2001) research clarifies what a correct IEP process ought to be. The most productive teams share traits such as precisely outlined duties, an encouraging network of individuals, an appreciation for different viewpoints, proximity and justice within their ranks, for instance.

Other obstacles include the everyday practices of classrooms not being consonant with the original content of the IEP, team members lacking efficiency in the implementation of the IEP, insufficient participation of parents in meetings concerning the IEP, and inadequate knowledge on the part of teachers about the goals of the IEPs (Whitworth, 1994). Any such shortcomings on the part of IEP team members will impact on the child. This requires serious action from the IEP team, which must collaborate in all areas and not only in the educational process (Lytle and Bordin, 2001; Smith, 2007).

Legislation-related matters can also be obstacles to IEP team members' participation. In a similar vein, in Saudi Arabia, there have been studies of IEPs for students with SEN which have pointed out significant problems. Al-Wabli (2000) reports that IEPs were not implemented in local schools in accordance with official policy, such as articles 54 and 55 of the EPKSA. As a result, a number of professionals in the field of special education have declared the wider adoption of IEPs to be a pressing issue. Research by Al-Khashrami (2001) found that special education schools in the KSA were not fully committed to implementing IEPs as set out in the special educational policy. The present study therefore focuses on the implementation of IEPs for students with ID and the development of practice within the RSEIP policy document.

It is also important to note that an IEP team member can assume more than one of the team positions, if appropriately qualified and selected (US Department of Education, 2000). For instance, a

representative from the school organising body may also take the role of interpreting the learner's assessment marks. In the US context, these individuals must collaborate with others in the writing of an IEP. There should also be a meeting to draft the IEP within a month of determining that the student is eligible for special education and other related services and facilities. While all team members need to bring some vital information to the IEP meeting, the gathered information should be shared among the members, who must work together to write the child's IEP. It is important to note that whatever information an individual brings should be added to the team's knowledge of the child's needs and should influence the strategies used and services involved. Nevertheless, the literature does not delineate specific instructions on which members ought to attend meetings.

Challenges to Active Parental Participation

This subsection discusses obstacles to parents' active involvement in IEP implementation which are referred to in the literature. For instance, many parents possess insufficient knowledge about the educational needs of their child. This could be due to a lack of knowledge and experience compared with that of education specialists, despite their willingness to participate in the various processes related to their child (Rock, 2000). In general, Stroggilos and Xanthacou (2006) found that parental involvement was limited and that parents themselves did not tend to consider that they made substantial contributions to the IEP team. Nonetheless, in the US, as mandated in 1990 by IDEA,

parents and/or guardians are considered equal associates in the promotion of the IEP (Tod et al., 1998; Yell, 2006). This means that the parents or guardians of students with disabilities should be able to take a more active part in the decision-making process.

Several researchers have concentrated on the typically limited parental participation in IEP practice. According to Stroggilos and Xanthacou (2006), teachers and other active members of the IEP team do not methodically collaborate with parents. Instead, parents are instructed to provide their thoughts about the objectives outlined by other professionals, rather than setting their own goals. As a result, several parents described feeling estranged from the IEP process, with the teachers and other more active team members completely controlling the decision-making process (Turnbull and Turnbull, 1997). Fish (2006:60) describes the IEP meeting as a 'meaningless ritual', because the involvement of parents in decision making was negligible. Such negative attitudes of teachers and other school staff towards parents' involvement in IEP practice might obstruct the wider implementation of IEPs for students with SEN in mainstream education programmes (Staples and Diliberto, 2010). Thus, it can be said that the commitment by IEP team members to cooperate with parents in the development of an IEP is a fundamental issue. The IEP provides a good opportunity to link the parents of SEN students with staff in schools. Based on the above, parents are an integral part of the process of improving the implementation of IEPs for students with intellectual disabilities.

Examples of such literature suggest that parents are not usually involved in the team's decisions, which tends to make parents feel both

daunted and guilty during regular IEP meetings, as if their contributions are meaningless. Also, parents are also inclined to believe that they are unable to discuss their worries about their children's education because they do not have a comprehensive understanding of the terms utilised in special education (Fish, 2006). Lack of understanding of the legislation, lack of knowledge of specialist terms or not knowing what is being asked of them can all serve as obstacles to parental participation. According to Deslands et al. (1999), legislation is not adequate to encourage parents to participate in these educational programmes.

Another important challenge to the participation of parents in the IEP process is poor communication between parents and school staff. Numerous studies have shown that the legal framework or relevant professional standards and guidelines fail to specify what parental involvement in this process should look like. Fish (2008) looked at the participation of parents in the educational process from the viewpoint of teachers of special education. The results indicate that teachers' views about parental involvement were generally positive. The need to develop programmes to encourage and support the role of parents in the educational process was also stressed. As suggested above, knowledge of these challenges may help professionals to develop strategies and inform staff training with a view to improving parents' experiences of the IEP process.

However, research in Saudi Arabia indicates that teachers fail to encourage parental involvement. For example, Abdullah (2003) argues that IEPs are usually applied by teachers of students with ID without the

effective involvement of the parents and other school staff in either special or mainstream schools. Teachers are not ready for greater involvement by parents in schools (Morrissette and Morrissette, 1999, cited in Engle, 2008:11). Therefore, the success of school provision for disabled students and the processes of psychological, professional and social development are not only dependent on the potential of the child and the school, but are also linked to the individual skills of the IEP team members and the efforts made to encourage greater parental involvement (Alqraiti, 2005). In addition, it is associated with the ability to utilise these skills and specialised expertise from a comprehensively collective point of view for the purpose of achieving the common goals as a unified group in the school environment (ibid). The RSEIP policy document (2002) suggests that the parents' contribution to the IEP development process improves the quality of education planning and that parents should be recognised members of the IEP team.

A number of studies in the Saudi context have identified socio-economic factors as significantly influencing parental participation in schools (Al-Kahtani, 2012; Aldosari and PufPaff, 2014). Similarly, Al-Twaijri (2007) reports that the most important obstacles hindering parental participation include lack of knowledge on their part about the importance of their contribution to their child's schooling and lack of awareness of its possible benefits for the student. However, the RSEIP assigns an important role to parents in the implementation of IEPs in mainstream schools and the above studies demonstrate a clear challenge to effecting policy in Saudi Arabia.

Addressing Challenges to IEP Implementation

Having discussed obstacles to successful IEP implementation, it is important to consider potential solutions to them. Some researchers have identified the best practice that could be a possible model approach to the types of challenges outlined above. For example, according to Aleada (2006), there are several ways to improve implementation of IEPs for students with SEN. For example, the experience of the state of Illinois in the United States in dealing with some obstacles to the achievement of the programme's objectives is helpful. The state tries to offer solutions through the design of a training programme to help staff to develop effective IEPs. This idea was supported by Whitworth (1994), who states that training programmes should offer dimensions that include knowledge and awareness, in order to provide a basic understanding of the IEP. Another dimension deals with the main process of the development of IEPs, which requires those responsible for implementation to have skills in several areas, such as communication, planning, time management and collective dynamics. This is intended to help trainees to acquire the skills of teamwork. Indeed, other authors have emphasised the importance of training and some have made the point that few studies have focused on the effectiveness of training for school staff and parents or how this impacts on IEP practice. According to Parsons et al. (2009:88), 'training for personnel involved has yet to be addressed for newly trained teachers or those requiring in-service training'. For this training to be effective, participants should be given

the opportunity to develop their collaborative skills through a series of team tasks.

It can be argued that the successful implementation of the IEP is based on the process of preparing the written statement which refers to the appropriate educational programme for the student with SEN. If IEP team members work productively together, they can contribute with their skills and creativity to the education of students with SEN, as well as addressing their behavioural problems (De Name, 1995). It can be seen that this underlines the importance of involving all team members during the educational process for students with special needs. The success of inclusive education requires a real partnership amongst IEP team members in the education of students with SEN (Smith, 2007).

For example, there is a need for parental involvement in the application of IEPs for intellectually disabled students, according to which parents have a specific role complementary to that of the school, while collaborating with members of staff in the performance of that specific role (Al-Kahtani, 2012). Carl (2002) argues that there are a few important ways in which parents can be helped to participate: first, to make a list of questions to be presented to the IEP team; second, to highlight the strengths of the student; third, to set up records of the child's needs; finally, to ask for clarification.

Overall, awareness of the various barriers to successful IEP implementation is crucial in planning appropriate strategies to overcome them. This knowledge will help instructors to develop suitable training related to IEPs and is important in creating a new spirit of teamwork to improve the level of educational services provided for students with

intellectual disabilities. A key element of this teamwork, which is designed to benefit the student, is the close involvement of those students' parents. This recognition is reflected in the next section, which presents the theoretical framework for this study. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that investigating human development necessitates an examination of the ecological system, which means that a child's education will be fundamentally affected by how the school and the parents work together.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

When designing the special education services that students with SEN require, recommendations frequently encompass a number of complicated skills that involve the teacher and other service providers in the field (Kupper, 2000; Anderson and Chiasson, 2012). The effective design of courses also entails an understanding of the complex interplay of student needs and relationships. As a consequence, this paper argues that ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) offers a crucial framework for understanding students with special needs (Al-Rubiyea, 2010). According to Richardson (2008), ecological models can be sensitive to contextual influences such as environment, family arrangements and residential settings. The application of ecological systems theory to special education is particularly helpful because 'the situation is complicated by the need to clarify the complex relationships among diversity, deficit and disability and the need to see how all the pieces fit together' (Anderson and Chiasson, 2012:2).

The selection of Bronfenbrenner's theory was informed by its focus on describing the circumstances and context in which an individual develops throughout their life (Lang, 2004). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that child development does not take place in a vacuum, instead being significantly shaped by external factors including their family life, education, the community to which they belong, and the society in which they are brought up. These dynamic and multifaceted settings in which child development occurs are therefore vital for understanding the specifics of this development (Lang, 2004). These environments, together with the interactions between these and the individual, are recognised as being of substantial importance in terms of child development (Bridge, Judd and Moock, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1970, 1977, 1979, 1989).

The concept of human development provided by ecological theories posits this development in the context of people's interaction with their environment (Arditti, 2005). This understanding of human development represents an attempt to scientifically investigate the complex and dynamic factors that affect both the individual and their environment, and which stem from their mutual interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) is therefore utilised to understand the strengths and obstacles that may be associated with the implementation of IEP policy in mainstream schools. Central to this theory is the aim of understanding students with special needs and the provision of a framework that supports the development of IEPs. Overall, the ecological environment is perceived as a consistent organisation of

constructions or levels of society, each enclosed within the other, known as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem levels. Figure 1 illustrates the general ecological environment framework for child development.

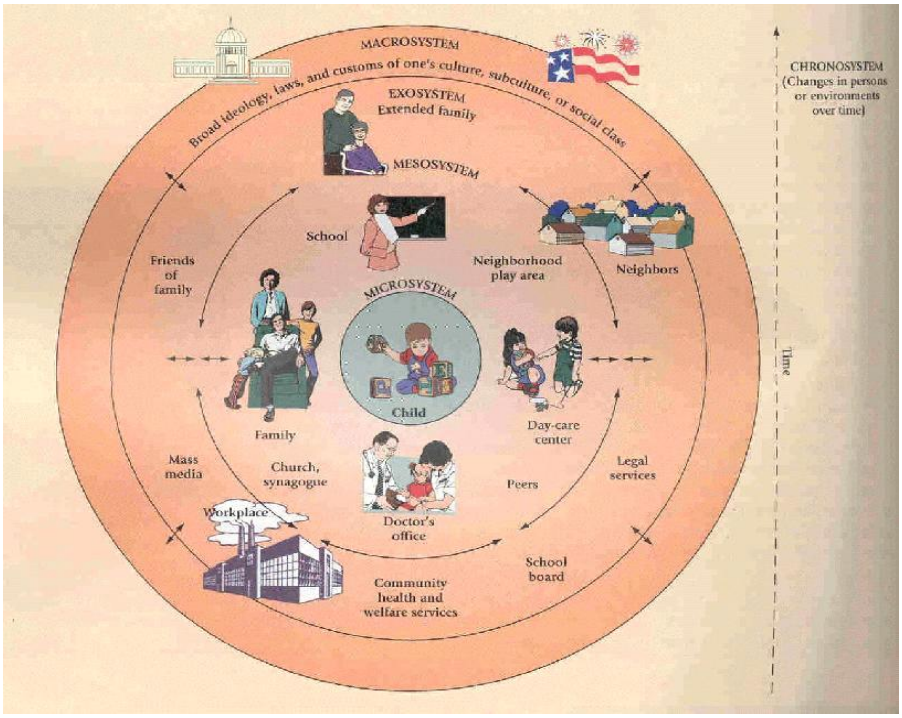


Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of child development

***Source*: Al-Rubiyea (2010:24)**

This paper therefore uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as both a theoretical and a practical tool that enables strengths and needs to be located in the different systems.

Methodology

Qualitative studies of mainstream schools are exceedingly rare in the Saudi context, even in the capital city of Riyadh; the extant literature on IEPS in Arab countries is almost exclusively quantitative in nature

(c.f. Abdullah, 2003; Hanafi, 2005; Al-Herz, 2008). However, this study is predicated upon the idea that in-depth qualitative examination of the perceptions of IEP team members offers unique insights into the implementation of IEPs in Saudi Arabia.

This study takes an interpretivist qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews and a key documentary source to supply data from four mainstream boys' primary schools in Riyadh, with the aim of exploring IEP team members' experiences of implementing IEPs designed for students with intellectual disabilities attending such schools.

Given the singular importance of the RSEIP document to educational practice in Saudi Arabia, the use of documentary analysis is essential in understanding practice and preconceptions of those working with IEP. Furthermore, documentary analysis is recognised as being under-represented not only in SEN research but also in educational research in general (Scott, 1990; McCulloch and Richardson, 2000; McCulloch, 2004).

This study used semi-structured interviews, to ensure that the researcher was in full charge of the interviewing process and that the respondents' answers to the pre-set questions were able to better serve the research aims, while offering the participants freedom to expand on the issues arising during each interview (Robson, 2011:280) and to offer detailed information regarding the experiences of participants (Drever, 2003). This form of interview concentrates on reactively eliciting responses from interviewees in order to provide a detailed analysis of their underlying motivation and their personal insights into the subject

matter under investigation, supporting that discussion through a structure that facilitates the expansion of ideas, thereby offering the researcher with opportunities to create abstract notions through descriptive material (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The interview questions addressed three main aspects of the implementation of IEPs in mainstream boys' primary schools in Riyadh:

- The roles of IEP team members
- Barriers to developing IEPs, as perceived by IEP team members
- Their suggested solutions to these challenges.

This study explores and uncovers the nature of a discrepancy between the RSEIP document and the actual practice of developing the plans in mainstream boys' primary schools in Riyadh. This gap between policy and practice is explored using an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), which suggests that the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems influence what happens on the ground. Bronfenbrenner's model enables a range of diverse matters regarding IEPs in Saudi Arabia to be addressed, as well as offering a stronger understanding of the relationship between the individual and the surrounding context. Figure 2 below shows how the data sources used here can be related to the different layers of the Bronfenbrenner (1979) model.

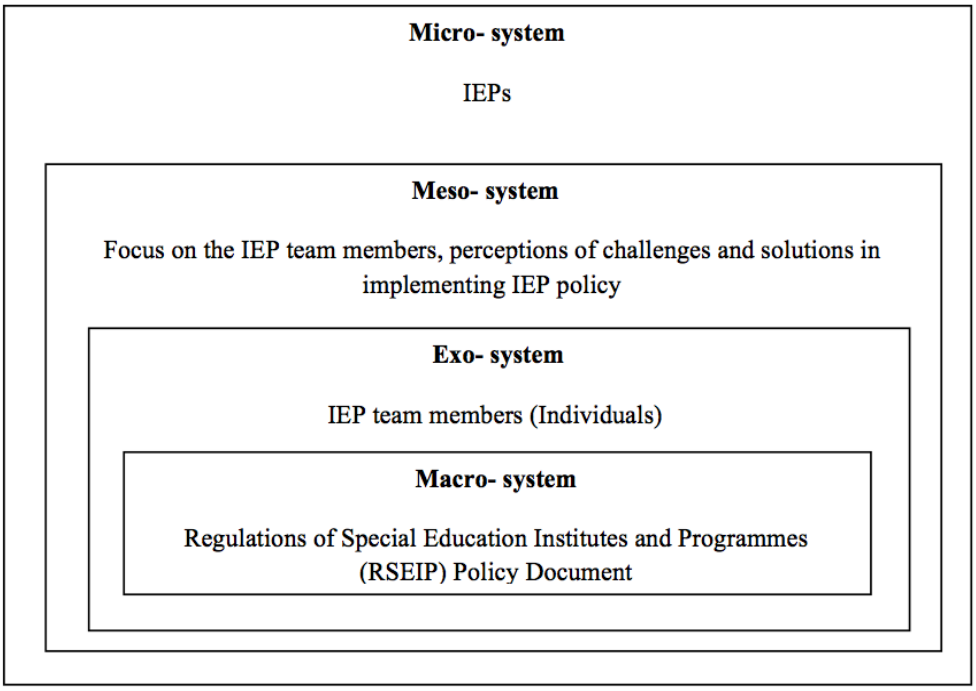


Figure 2: relationship between data sources and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model

The figure above indicates that the microsystem corresponds to the practice of IEPs, which was examined by using semi-structured interviews, looking at such aspects as the IEP team members' understanding, commitment and attitudes concerning the implementation of IEPs in their schools. The study then investigated how the mesosystem impacted on the barriers experienced to the implementation of IEPs and solutions proposed, with a particular focus on the perceptions of school staff members and those of fathers. For example, there is a lack of coordination among the mainstream schools and home. As to the exosystem, semi-structured interviews were used to discuss the impact of the school context on the development of individual IEP team members' roles, each member's perceived role in implementing IEPs and the quality of school-parent interaction needed for effective

collaboration. For example, the interactions between IEP team members are the exosystem. Next, concerning the macrosystem, it examined issues pertaining to social policy, looked at historical and cultural contexts and developed an understanding of the influences of research on policy in implementing IEPs for students with ID in mainstream schools. These were examined through the analysis of documents and through a survey of the related literature.

Finally, the present study explores links between the four levels of the model, to help identify the barriers and suggest new ways forward for implementing IEPs more productively within the Saudi context. The study thus contributes a unique multiple perspectives based on qualitative empirical data and provides important insights regarding the usefulness of Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework in exploring IEP policy and practice more broadly.

The RSEIP policy document was evaluated in terms of its authenticity, reliability, meaning and theorisation (Scott, 1990; McCulloch, 2004). Authenticity describes the degree to which a document is 'genuine and of unquestionable origin' (Scott, 1990:6).

The data collection stage of this study was carried out in the capital, Riyadh, which is also the city where students with intellectual disabilities first began to attend mainstream schools. The four schools in this study (one each from the north, south, east and west of the city) were not representative of all mainstream schools in Riyadh. Their selection was based on my own experience as a teacher, student teacher and resident supervisor. They were also the first mainstream schools in the Riyadh region where programmes for students with intellectual disabilities were established.

The paper sample comprised one special education teacher, one head teacher, one counsellor, one psychologist and one father of a student with mild intellectual disability chosen from the IEP team, making a total of 20 interviewees, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Semi-Structured Interviews IEP team Samples

Primary mainstreaming schools for students with intellectual disabilities	Region (Riyadh)	Semi-Structured Interview
Mainstream School	North	1 Special Education Teacher 1 Head Teacher 1 Counsellor 1 Psychologist 1 Father of male student with mild intellectual disability
Mainstream School	South	1 Special Education Teacher 1 Head Teacher 1 Counsellor 1 Psychologist 1 Father of male student with mild intellectual disability
Mainstream School	West	1 Special Education Teacher 1 Head Teacher 1 Counsellor 1 Psychologist 1 Father of male student with mild intellectual disability
Mainstream School	East	1 Special Education Teacher 1 Head Teacher 1 Counsellor 1 Psychologist 1 Father of male student with mild intellectual disability
Total	4	20

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis of interview data was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Themes were identified and used to inform the development of abstract concepts. This six-step framework provided some practical steps for thematic analysis, using examples from the authors' own research methods. In other words, it provides assistance to the novice qualitative researcher to deal with data analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:79), thematic analysis is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data'. Among its advantages are its flexibility and its ability to shed light on the major themes to be identified in the process (Howitt and Cramer, 2008).

The first phase involved becoming familiar with the data collected by reading and re-reading the transcribed interviews, in the original Arabic, with the aim of searching for meanings and possible patterns. The transcripts were then translated into English by the researcher and sent to a colleague at King Saud University to perform an independent back translation. This phase also involved taking notes for coding in the subsequent stages of thematic analysis, thus providing 'the bedrock for the rest of the analysis', as 'ideas and identification of possible patterns' were formed through reading (Braun and Clarke, 2006:87).

The second phase involved generating initial codes and grouping data relevant to each code. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:88), the process of coding involves identifying a feature of the data, whether covert or overt, and referring to 'the most basic segment, or element, of

the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon'. In this study, the assignment of initial codes was done manually by going through the entire dataset and highlighting important sections. Each highlighted section of text was given a corresponding code name that described it. For example, one theme concerned the challenges to IEP implementation, so a theme was created along with its code as follows:

Theme: Challenges to IEP

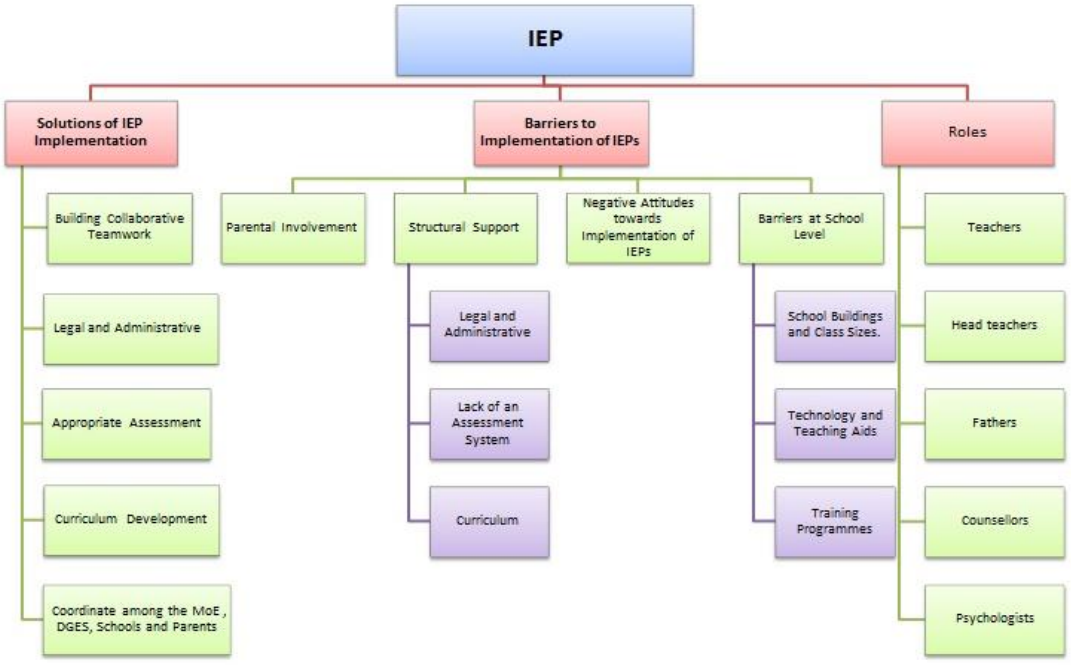
Code: Challg IEP

The third phase entailed gathering all data relevant to each theme. Braun and Clarke (2006:83) advocate the use of an inductive approach in which themes identified are 'strongly linked to the data themselves'. In this study, while the identification of themes was indeed a data-driven process, it was partly influenced by the researcher's theoretical framework based on the four layers of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory. At this stage, the data were analysed according to the separate emerging themes, in order to achieve a complete understanding of each of these themes individually and in the context of the overall framework of ecological theory. Blending participants' understandings with those of the researcher generated multiple meanings and perspectives, while allowing space for the coexistence of diverse perspectives and the unfolding of new meanings.

Kvale (1996:190) describes data analysis as a process that 'involves developing the meaning of the interviews, bringing the subjects' own understanding into the light as well as providing new perspectives from the researcher on the phenomena'. Consequently, after

a number of themes were established from the interview schedule, the transcripts were subjected to repeated reading and re-examination, during which they were constantly compared against the theoretical framework and existing literature, which facilitated the creation of a list of themes and subthemes. Each theme was then assigned a file in Microsoft Word and was given a name and an abbreviated code for easy retrieval. The responses were then grouped by themes under the relevant categories. The main themes under which the data were grouped are displayed in figure 3. Finally, each data extract was inserted under the relevant theme or subtheme.

Figure 3: Thematic analysis model of all major themes



The fourth phase consisted of studying the identified themes and making sure that data and codes were consistent with each relevant theme. This was done at two levels. The first involved reviewing the

coded data extracts. Each set of collated extracts was subjected to a careful reading to ensure that they formed a coherent pattern and were consistent with the allotted theme. Those extracts deemed to not fit under their existing themes were accommodated by the creation of new themes. The second level of phase four involved reviewing the entire dataset. Each individual theme was revisited with the aim of considering the extent to which it accurately represented the meaning of the dataset as a whole. This meant coding additional data within the themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:91), 'the need for re-coding from the data set is to be expected as coding is an on-going organic process'. The following example shows four subthemes generated for the theme 'Barriers to IEPs':

Theme: Barriers to IEPs

Code: Barr IEPs

1- Parental Involvement
2- Structural Support
3- Negative Attitudes towards Implementation of IEPs
4- School Level

In the fifth phase, themes were defined and named. This process of defining and refining has been called 'the essence of what each theme is about (as well as the themes overall), and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:92). A detailed account of each theme was written, highlighting interesting aspects raised in the data, with careful consideration of the themes themselves

and of the research questions. This was followed by giving each theme a working title.

The final phase was to write a report of the qualitative data analysis, supporting the findings within each theme, to serve as the foundation of a discussion of the major research outcomes. This report provided 'sufficient evidence of the themes within the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006:93). The responses of all participants were divided into five groups: teachers, head teachers, counsellors, psychologists and fathers. In order to ensure clarity while also ensuring the confidentiality of participants, responses were coded using a system of descriptive labels and numbers (Teacher 3, Father 4, Head 2, Psychologist 1, and Counsellor 5).

Quality of Research and Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the establishment of validity is different from that in quantitative research, where it means that the research tools accurately and effectively measure the variables for which they have been specifically designed (Golafshani, 2003).). The concept of validity is more broadly described in qualitative studies as quality, rigour and trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

For a study to be meaningful and trustworthy, it is essential that its individual processes be conducted fairly, representing the perceptions and experience of the study sample as closely as possible (Ely, 1991). In qualitative research, the idea of trustworthiness denotes the level of belief that others can have in the validity and dependability of the

research findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A wide range of methodological approaches can be used to increase the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, member checking, and thick description (ibid). In the context of this study, the quality and trustworthiness of the research results were ensured through: triangulation of sources and triangulation of method; prolonged engagement techniques; and re-checking with participants. In terms of sources, data were collected from four mainstream primary schools with facilities for students with intellectual disabilities, where the interviewees represented the full spectrum of IEP team members set out in the RSEIP, namely special education teachers, the fathers of students with intellectual disabilities, head teachers, counsellors and psychologists. In terms of triangulation of method, the empirical data gathered by means of these interviews were supplemented by documentary data of the RSEIP document (Table 2). Although the findings of the present study may be useful to other SEN researchers and practitioners in similar contexts, it should be stressed that triangulation was not carried out to generalise the findings, as that is not the aim of this study, but rather to gain a fuller and more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 2: Triangulation of methods and sources

Methods	Sources
Documentary data (Macrosystem)	**RSEIP policy document**

Semi-structured interviews (Mesosystem and exosystem)	IEP team members (teachers, head teachers, counsellors, psychologists and fathers)

Prolonged engagement refers to the collection of data over an extended period of time, which may be less than six months or more than two years (Ely et al., 1998). It ensures 'the investment of sufficient time to achieve a certain purpose' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:19). In the present case, visits to schools to collect data took place from mid-May to the end of August 2012, allowing the researcher time to gain an excellent insight into the ways in which IEPs for students with intellectual disabilities were implemented there.

As to the technique of re-checking with participants, it is important to note that a qualitative stance was adopted in this study while recognising the potential for the beliefs and values of the researcher to affect the findings, thereby potentially harming the overall validity of the research. This means that data processing and analysis approaches must be considered for authenticity and appropriateness with as much rigour as the findings themselves. This was partially managed by giving the participants an opportunity to validate their responses before the analysis and interpretation processes were even begun. This aspect of validation concerns construct validity, which can be seen as 'the degree to which the research process re-orients, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it' (Scheurich, 1997:83). One way to achieve this is to ensure a degree of

consistency between the constructed realities of the researcher's interpretation of the data and findings on one hand, and the realities and perspectives offered by the respondents on the other.

One of the methods used in the present study to ensure accuracy in the data collection and analysis was the recording and transcription of all the interviews. Therefore, each interviewee was sent a written transcript in the original Arabic by email, enabling them to check for any areas of confusion, whether on the part of the researcher or the respondent. In addition, there were telephone discussions (when required) to confirm that all matters were well understood from the participant's standpoint. The researcher then translated the interview data from Arabic to English. The aim of language translation techniques, which are central to many cross-cultural qualitative research studies, is to minimise potential threats to validity (Esposito, 2001). To check for accuracy of meaning and consistency in translating the data, the present researcher asked a colleague who, like himself, was fluent in both English and Arabic to independently translate the quotes from Arabic to English. The two translations were found to be similar and resulted in no significant differences in the interpretation of what interviewees had said. Next, the researcher translated the quotations into English and sent to a member of staff at the SEN Department of King Saud University, who translated them back into Arabic to verify that the resulting text was close to the original Arabic transcripts of the interviews. The researcher then took advice from colleagues to address issues that arose in terms of using the correct translation of certain phrases or words from Arabic into English, in an attempt to ensure rigour and accuracy.

Access and Ethical Considerations

For this study, an ethical research proposal was completed and considered by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Lincoln. The proposal was duly approved by the chair of the University's Ethics Committee. Only once ethical approval had been granted and permission obtained from the relevant authorities did this research begin. Upon gaining ethical approval, I began the long and time-consuming process of seeking access to schools, in addition to submitting an application for a provisional offer from the MoE to conduct this research at four mainstream schools in the Riyadh region selected for this study. The study, including its core aims and objectives, was then discussed with a number of key stakeholders in the MoE, namely representatives from the Department of Curricular Development, the Department for Educational Research and the Directorate General of Special Education.

Once the provisional offer had been obtained, it was submitted, along with the research plan and other supporting documents, to the Saudi Cultural Bureau in London, in order to formally address my sponsor, the University of King Saud in Riyadh, with a request for the approval of the data collection process. Two months later, after final approval had been granted, further personal contact was made with the MoE with a request to issue letters to the region's LEA in Riyadh, as the next stage in enabling the data collection process. The LEA in Riyadh agreed to contact the selected mainstream boy's schools for students with intellectual disabilities to secure admission with IEP team members,

which meant that individuals could then be contacted for their permission to participate, giving their informed consent after having been assured of their confidentiality and anonymity within the research.

Prior to the commencement of this study, consent forms (in Arabic) were submitted to, and completed versions obtained from, all participants involved in the study. These forms included an explanation of the aims and purposes of the study as well as the benefits to be expected. In addition, the informed consent process included requests for participation and noted the rights of participants to withdraw from the study at any stage without affecting their treatment by their schools, thereby ensuring that 'informed consent implies informed refusal' (Cohen et al., 2000:51).

At the first stage of the interview process, before the interviews started, each participant was assured of confidentiality and anonymity within the research study. They were also assured that any information that they supplied would be used only for the purposes of the study. Once permission had been granted, the interviews were recorded, although if requested, the recording process could be suspended. This was particularly important in ensuring that participants felt comfortable in disclosing certain personal details during the interview. Participants were also assured that the characters and codes used to describe them in the analysis, discussion and publication of the data would not be assigned in a manner that enabled their identification. As an illustration of this, assurances were fulfilled through the use of pseudonyms and the listing of the interviews in a random order to protect the identities of participants. Finally, once data had been collected, they were stored in a

safe place and were not shared with any third parties such as supervisors, teachers or school head teachers.

Limitations of the Study

A number of challenges may be seen as having constrained the success of this study. The first problem was to persuade IEP team members to participate, as many were busy and unaware of the importance of qualitative research. Secondly, there were challenges in accessing the most suitable schools which would welcome the data collection process. The three months available for data collection were also insufficient to conduct a very large number of comprehensive face-to-face interviews, given the time needed to do so and to analyse the data. Another constraint to the data collection process was the degree of gender sensitivity in Saudi Arabia, which made face-to-face interviews with female participants impractical. A further set of obstacles were the geographical and financial factors making it unfeasible to arrange visits to all parts of Saudi Arabia and restricting the conduct of face-to-face interviews to one city, Riyadh. Had it been feasible to involve a much larger sample from all regions, the research might have had different outcomes, but this would have required the investment of more time and money than were available for a doctoral research project. Finally, the qualitative methods of data collection and analysis also mean that the findings of the study cannot be generalised.

Discussion and Findings

Analysis of the documentary data of the RSEIP policy and the compiled data from the interviews revealed a disconnection between the macrosystem and every other level of the system. These indicate poor understanding, poor communication, and poor coordination among IEP team members. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system demonstrates degrees of failure in the flow from macro policy through the different systemic levels to the microsystem. The following sections present an analysis of five distinct roles within the IEP team within the exosystem, which is the level at which the teams interact with one another to create the IEP. This is supplemented by critical analyses of the relevant parts of the policy document.

Teachers

Given the size of this role and their centrality to the lives of children with SEN it is important to know how their teachers work with students with intellectual disabilities and what they do in relation to the creation of IEPs. At the microsystem level of the child, the teacher has the primary direct-contact during the school day. At the exosystem, the teacher is dependent upon the successful workings of the IEP team. A lack of communicative interactions with individuals and agencies at the mesosystem levels, by the teacher, will also impact the child's microsystem.

The findings suggest that teachers of SEN take a leading role in the coordination and implementation of IEPs, which as discussed below, should not be their role. It would seem here that the SEN teacher is doing too much on the ground in the creation of the IEP as well as being

responsible for the IEP implementation in school. Teacher 5 illustrated this attitude:

> *'I developed the IEP in terms of its preparation and I am responsible for implementing the IEP for children with special needs. A special education teacher is one who leads the implementation process of the plan, as opposed to the rest of the team who [no details concerning the team overseeing the plan] are only there to sign on the IEPs'.*

Teacher 3 of students with SEN shared the same view:

> *'My role involves the preparation and implementation of individual education plans for students with intellectual disabilities, in coordination with the resident supervisor within the school'.*

Interviewees did not mention other members of the team, illustrating that the diverse tasks are being disproportionately undertaken by teachers. This is not in line with the macrosystem as envisaged in the policy document, which requires the cooperation of teams at school. Without a transdisciplinary approach there is no sharing of 'information, knowledge, skills, and where team members worked jointly on assessments, programme planning and implementation' (Travers, 2014:7) to best meet the needs of the students. Teachers working alone create problems as they strive to cope with a rising workload, potentially impacting upon the quality of service provided to each child. This means the school practice advocates that the teacher is doing too much.

Head Teachers

As chair of the IEP team, the head teacher should assume the lead role in organising the team, through careful co-operation and co-ordination with other team members within the mesosystem. These efforts at the exosystem level are intended to be central to the implementation of IEPs, so through these functions head teachers are charged with directly impacting on the IEP and the children at the microsystem level. The RSEIP policy stipulates a significant leadership role for head teachers in the provision of special education, with a

particular focus on providing and monitoring the professional development and support of the IEP team. This can manifest in personal development and the ongoing assessment of teacher performance and training needs.

With regard to some aspects of head teachers' participation, the interviews indicated that head teachers were not fulfilling their official duties; rather they were implementing only a small portion of what the RSEIP policy document (2002) stipulates. While the RSEIP requires head teachers to chair a multidisciplinary IEP team, many of the interviewees did not seem to understand this aspect of their role, instead arguing that their role in IEP implementation was in need of further clarification. For example, Head Teacher 4 said:

'My role is poorly defined concerning the implementation of IEPs within the school'.

Head Teacher 3 expressed a similarly vague understanding of his role:

'IEPs come from the teachers and my only involvement is to sign them'.

In addition, the findings suggest that head teachers often blamed the MoE for not clarifying their roles, as well as for failing to offer the necessary support required to implement IEPs. Head Teacher 4 showed this in the following excerpt:

'The MoE has as yet given insufficient attention to the training programmes of head teachers in the implementation of IEPs at mainstream schools'.

The head teachers interviewed in this study indicated a failure to adhere to the RSEIP policy document regarding IEP implementation for a number of reasons, including the local conditions not facilitating compliance. Participants suggested that head teachers were insufficiently specialised, with the curricula of courses attended by head teachers in Saudi universities including no mandatory modules in the field of special education. Accordingly, it can be argued that head teachers graduate from university without the requisite background knowledge of special education, of the concept of inclusive education, or of the tools required for the preparation and application of courses for children with special needs. It is only natural then, in the absence of training in special education, that many head teachers will experience difficulties in the implementation of IEPs at their schools.

School Counsellors

The role of counsellors within the RSEIP document is defined as one of planning and of supporting students in the microsystems of the children and the parents. However, an analysis of the data suggests that counsellors in the sample generally act only at the exosystem of the children, although by largely working with or communicating with fathers they are working in the child's mesosystem, and only one of the counsellors interviewed got to work with children. This is partially in line with the official role of school counsellors as defined by the RSEIP, which is to operate at the exosystem, interacting with the other groups of professionals who are involved in developing the IEP. This type of role would engage counsellors in microsystem level interactions with the

children which would facilitate a useful contribution to the IEP, although multiple interviewees indicated a degree of role confusion. Counsellor 3 indicated that there is role confusion which has negative consequences for development of IEPs. So in describing his involvement with one IEP team, Counsellor 3 said:

> *'The IEP team members were not fully aware of the roles assigned to them as stated in the rules and regulations concerning the application of the individual education plan on students with intellectual disabilities'.*

These findings suggest related problems, because counsellors not serving as mediators between home and school means that lines of communication between fathers and teachers remain closed. Additionally, it indicates that many schools are failing to effectively draw upon and incorporate the valuable skills and perspectives that counsellors can bring. For example, SEN Teacher 1 explained in the following interview extract:

> *'The weak communication between SEN teachers and fathers related to the IEP might impact on the collective work team and the learning process for students with ID within school'.*

This lack of communication between teachers and fathers might detract from IEP teamwork and worsen the resulting outcomes for the child at school.

School Psychologists

At the macrosystem (RSEIP policy) level, the psychologist is supposed to play an important role in the process of developing the IEP through the administration of tests that might help discern what the child needs and then engaging with the child using psychological techniques, such as behavioural therapy. In addition, psychologists should support the process by offering any expertise and evidence that directs and supports the child. In this sense they are supposed to be operating at the exosystem and the microsystem level.

The findings suggest that psychologists were, as the RSEIP suggests, carrying out tasks, such as IQ tests and the procedures for the measurement and diagnosis of intellectual disabilities in students. However, Psychologist 3 who was involved in this task still thought that there was an inadequate level of implementation of IEP at mainstream boys' schools:

> *'I did not perform all the tasks related to the psychologists as mentioned in the RSEIP document. Nevertheless, I have implemented some of the duties, such as the assessment of abilities and behaviour for students with intellectual disabilities during the diagnostic procedures'.*

Nevertheless, there was no shared understanding of what the involvement of psychologists should be on the ground with regards to IEPs in schools. It was felt that this impacted upon their ability to perform their tasks effectively. This was exacerbated by the participants not working at the microsystem level with the child in the classroom, resulting in limited ability to contribute via the exosystem to the IEP.

Psychologist 1 also indicated that communication could at times be only at the exosystem with other IEP team members and that this was also perceived as generally ineffective:

> *'My role basically involved identifying the extent to which a student has improved in terms of his individual learning. Regarding the IEP process, my role includes being with the teacher. In other words, I'm in charge of the analysis of diagnostic and assessment tasks, and the rest is left to the teacher'.*

It seemed that there was insufficient coordination and understanding of the roles of psychologists by other IEP team members, which is likely to impact negatively on the child within his immediate environment. This is reflective of difficulties at the mesosystem, for example, the lack of professional development, which is shaping this context in which there is a lack of coherence about what the role should be.

Parents

It is important to remember that in Saudi culture, the education system is based upon the notion that men and women from different families should not speak to one another in public. Under this system, fathers are responsible for boys in the schools as, despite caring for boys in the home, mothers cannot communicate directly face to face with the school staff. Occasionally schools can communicate with mothers by telephone or through male relatives from the extended family, but this is rare. To simplify matters and to explore the best case scenario from the

point of view of boys' schools, the fathers interviewed were the fathers of male students with ID who attended one of the special education classrooms attached to Saudi public primary schools in Riyadh. At the macrosystem level, the father is supposed to play a critical role in relation to male students and is postulated as being a great help to the IEP team within the mesosystem, as laid out in Article 76 of the RSEIP (MoE, 2002:73-74).

In general, the lack of parental involvement (fathers and mothers) is recognised as being one of the major barriers to IEP implementation and a factor that can have a major negative impact on the educational process, leading to weak learning outcomes (c.f. Al-Khashrami, 2001; Abdullah, 2003; Hanafi, 2005; Al-Herz, 2008). In this research, the interview data demonstrates that on the whole, with only one exception, fathers were much less involved within the IEP process in mainstream schools than most other participants. This limited contribution exists despite the emphasis given in the RSEIP policy and the wider literature suggesting that parents, both fathers and mothers, have a critical role to play.

When fathers were asked about their responsibilities in implementing IEPs for students with intellectual disabilities, their responses varied, but as with other participants, important discrepancies were revealed between beliefs, practices and policy. For example, Father 2 did not want to be involved with the IEP team because he had insufficient time:

'I did not really pay attention to calls from the school to participate in the diagnosis, preparation, implementation and

evaluation of the individual educational plan, or even in observing the schooling of my son in other areas [...]. There may be some shortcomings in this respect but my reason was a lack of time'.

One commonly cited issue was with limited availability of time to devote to IEP design. In the broader literature a lack of time is often associated with parents being in work during school hours and being too busy to be able to communicate with schools. In the Saudi case this is compounded by the fact that fathers are often the only earners and are likely to be in full-time work. It might be that this aspect of IEP implementation is more effective in Saudi Arabian girls' schools but this needs investigation as there is no research to consult regarding this.

In fact, while the macrosystem (RSEIP policy document) demands the formal inclusion of fathers in the IEP team, parents may not see the value of this role or they may be excluded by the school. Father 1 was also not included in IEP creation, although this seemed to be more as a result of the school`s approach in not inviting or consulting with him:

'I did not have any role because I had not been informed or invited by the school administration to participate, either in the diagnosis or in the preparation and implementation of an individual educational plan for my son, or even in the observation of how my son is getting on with this plan'.

Hence, whilst the RSEIP defines these parents as being part of the team exosystem, because of their close involvement with the child's

microsystem in terms of the development and implementation of the IEP, the evidence suggests that is not happening effectively.

Consolidated Findings

The first and perhaps most important of the findings suggests that participating teachers of SEN implemented their own vision, without any cooperation with the rest of the other team members within the schools (as demanded by RSEIP policy). However, the views of teachers better matched those presented by the macrosystem (policy) level than did those of other IEP team members. Nevertheless, their approach to IEP development demonstrates a disregard for the process championed by the Saudi government as most effectively representing the child. This may have led to poorer outcomes for the students within the microsystem level.

The second finding revealed that other key professional participants (head teachers, counsellors and psychologists) appeared almost uninterested in playing a role in implementing IEPs, potentially reflecting a lack of knowledge on their behalf. For example, all but two school professionals reported an interaction with the IEP process that demonstrated insufficient knowledge of the responsibilities laid down in the RSEIP manual regarding IEP implementation.

The third finding showed that the fathers interviewed appeared to have insufficient knowledge regarding their main duties in the implementation of IEPs. Some of the fathers and school staff also failed to collaborate (mesosystem level), which suggests a lack of clear understanding regarding the roles of IEP team members. The responses of all of the participants support the idea that a mismatch exists between

policy (the macrosystem level) and practice (at the meso and exosystem level). Extant research suggests that this will eventually result in less satisfactory educational outcomes at the microsystem level for the child (Al-Khashrami, 2001). It can be concluded that the IEP process does not reflect the aims and objectives of the declared RSEIP policy, leading to the existence of a gap between policy and practice with teachers often bearing the major workload in the preparation and implementation of IEPs for students with intellectual disabilities.

Overall, it seems evident that while IEP implementation emphasises the importance of the role of IEP team members and depends on individuals to make specific commitments to this process, there is a failure to adhere to the policy set out in the RSEIP. In particular, participants did not report performing their duties as stipulated in Article 22. The data demonstrates that although the policy offers a macrosystem framework, there is inconsistency with regards to its interpretation and practical implementation. Participants did not necessarily agree on what effective practice should look like in their local context.

Bronfenbrenner Analysis

Microsystem

The microsystem is defined as ‘a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:22). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory provides a way to being mapping out the microsystem and to then speculate about the issues that may arise from any shortcomings. The findings suggest

that the micro-interactions between children with an intellectual disability and members of the IEP team at the microsystem level generally included only the SEN teachers (Al-Wabli, 2000; Abdullah, 2003; Hanafi, 2005 and Al-Herz, 2008) and fathers, although a psychologist interacted directly with the children in one of the four schools sampled.

Bi-directional influences were noted, with the microsystem of the child being influenced by failings at the exosystem and mesosystem levels. In the other direction, members of the IEP team need to be functioning members of the microsystem if they are to contribute to the macrosystem. For example, those parents who are effective at interacting with their children in the micro environment are more likely to be better equipped to be part of the exosystem and able to help inform the actions of the other team members at the micro level. The more places where members of the IEP team are able to form nurturing and encouraging relationships with the child at the microsystem level (such as the home and the school), the more likely it is that the needs of the child will be represented in the exosystem. These types of changes seem likely to increase the possibility of an IEP being designed that can better support the development of children with SEN.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem can be explained as 'the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighbourhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work, and social life)' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:25). In this context, the RSEIP stipulates

that the IEP team should be engaging in rich and frequent interactions around the needs of the child. However, the findings of this study indicate that poor interactions exist between home-school, including the different agents that are supposed to be involved in the IEP within the mesosystem. Serious difficulties with IEP planning are apparently located in the failure of team members to interact with one another.

Exosystem

Bronfenbrenner (1979:25) defines an exosystem as 'one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person'. The findings revealed that SEN teachers typically operate with a high degree of independence and initiative. They have a central and solitary role in the creation and implementation of IEPs, leading many to regard themselves as the leading members of IEP teams. However, the RSEIP document (2002) specifies that it is the head teacher who has the authoritative responsibility and who should therefore assume the lead role in organising the IEP team through careful co-operation and co-ordination. The participating head teachers tend not to exercise such a positive leadership role, however, instead demonstrating lower than required levels of IEP organisation and management, acting as signatories or sources of authentication while many of their other responsibilities are carried out by the SEN teachers. Equally the role of a school counsellor is to facilitate communication at the mesosystem level between fathers and school staff, yet the findings indicate that they do not carry out this role. The school psychologists are also insufficiently involved in the

preparation of IEPs, to the degree instructed in the RSEIP policy document (2002). For example, the roles of the psychologist include IQ testing and the assessment of intellectual disabilities, both of which are crucial in effective IEP development. The parents themselves are expected to support the school and other IEP team members by responding to their various requests, in addition to which their more intimate knowledge of their child is supposed to be an important facet of the planning. The findings indicate that this is typically not the case.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem describes 'consistencies in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro, meso, and exo) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:26). The policy seems to clearly express what should be happening and this articulation is concordant with good practice internationally (Polloway and Patton, 1997). This suggests that a problem exists with the flow of policy from one systemic level to another. Macro level policy needs to be supported by policies at other levels (e.g. the exosystem level) to support its implementation (Hegarty, 1997). The macrosystem also seems to lack adequate legislation with respect to the degrees of enforcement (ibid).

Study Outcomes (Barriers and Solutions)

This research examined the IEP teams at four mainstream boys' schools that accept children with intellectual disabilities. From the participating schools, 20 interviews were drawn and the accounts compared with the roles prescribed within the RSEIP policy document.

The conclusions of this study are organised into four subsections corresponding with the four layers of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem.

The ideas of Bronfenbrenner (1979) have been supported by writers such as de Valenzuela (2014), who highlights the importance of focusing on the learning context, with sociocultural theory stating that learning is achieved through the interaction between the child and their environment. The ecological systems theory therefore enables an exploration of the impact of a child's surroundings upon IEP development. These surroundings can be affected by numerous factors, as well as by the influences of bidirectional flows between different people and different layers of the system, whether positive or negative. For instance, level of economic prosperity or deprivation can influence the implementation of an IEP within the macrosystem. The adoption of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model challenges the medical model assumption that experiences of disability are fixed by the physical or psychological aspects of a condition, which often makes them appear as irresolvable issues. Rejecting this assumption, Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides an alternative social model which recognises the importance of the environment and context in understanding the development of children. In fact, Bronfenbrenner later amended this model in 1992 to explicitly take account of children with disabilities (Bricout et al., 2004).

Microsystem Solutions

The findings in this study highlight the importance of multi-setting participation, whereby the student interacts with others in multiple

settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The evidence therefore suggests that the RSEIP document could be amended to provide better guidance with regards to relations among peers at school, in the neighbourhood and in social life.

The majority of the participating head teachers, counsellors and psychologists were not fully knowledgeable of their roles as stipulated in the RSEIP document. In this respect, Al-Fahili (2009:3) emphasises 'the need to review the RSEIP practice guidance to include a set of additional features that aim to help head teachers understand and be aware of their role requirements towards mainstreaming programmes in Saudi Arabia'. Therefore, this study strongly recommends that the model of Collaborative Professional Development (CPD) be utilised to clarify the roles of IEP team members in the development and implementation of IEPs.

Both the RSEIP document and the Bronfenbrenner model demonstrate that parents should play an active, central role within both mesosystem and microsystem. This parental role should be facilitated by head teachers, with the necessary training, advice and invitations. It is particularly important to note that the parent is the primary source to consult in collecting the information necessary for IEP implementation in schools. As a consequence of this, the fathers of boys and mothers of girls with SEN must be helped to understand the need for IEPs as part of the education process.

Mesosystem Solutions

No specific recommendations are made for action within the mesosystem, as the necessary improvements are very much linked to those that should first occur across the exosystem level. The expectation

can reasonably be that increased investment to improve professionalism and the appropriateness of services should contribute to a more cooperative IEP team within the mesosystem. Importantly, head teachers, who provide the source of authority in schools, should assume responsibility for organising the IEP team members in such a way that they are able to interact with greater efficiency, understanding and coordination within the mesosystem. This is also why MoE officials, operating within the exosystem, must become more actively involved in working with head teachers. Indeed, it is their interactions with head teachers within the mesosystem that should establish early clarity and thereby lead to the creation of the strategic foundation from which the head teachers should begin the work of improving the IEP process.

Exosystem Solutions

The development and restructuring of the exosystem requires the service provided by an educational supervisor from the MoE and school head teachers to be significantly improved, because the existing guidance, planning and organisation have been demonstrated to be inadequate. Therefore, discussions should be held between head teachers and properly trained MoE officials regarding the processes stipulated in the RSEIP document for the creation and implementation of IEPs. Head teachers should be instructed to take a strong leadership and organisational role in this, coordinating IEP team members and building a cooperative team spirit among them (c.f. De Name, 1995; Smith, 2007). The importance of collaboration between individual professionals within the school has been explicitly recognised in Australia, which can

serve as an example of best practice (McCausland, 2005). It should also be remembered that Bronfenbrenner (1979) identifies three exosystem levels (the parents' place of work, their social networks and the influences of the community) as those typically expected to be most influential on the family. Therefore, greater emphasis should be placed upon the bidirectional influences of such environmental factors within the RSEIP document, better reflecting their relevance to the initiation of IEPs with the mesosystem.

Macrosystem Solutions

At the macrosystem level, it is recommended that the RSEIP document be adapted to better take certain aspects of Saudi culture into account. For example, detailed consideration should be given to issues such as the cultural shame felt by the parents of children with SEN. The RSEIP document could explicitly outline educational proposals to increase awareness and understanding of such issues. This might be supported by measures such as an extensive government media campaign to mitigate or eliminate this cultural shame through heightened societal awareness. In other words, society needs to be educated to have greater sympathy and compassion for the families of children with SEN, as well as for the children themselves. This will require extensive commitment from the government in terms of both organisational effort and financial investment.

Overall, the findings of this study emphasise the importance of effective partnerships between schools and parents (Mislan et al., 2008). It is therefore recommended that IEP team members should be required to

collaborate to develop the IEP process in a way that best benefits the student with SEN.

Conclusion

The results of this study revealed a discrepancy between official policy and the operation of IEPs in Saudi mainstream boys' schools, indicating a failure to translate theory into current practice. In addition to the strategies, actions and activities of the school environment, the IEP process is influenced by ecological theory, the effects of which can be seen at all stages of the implementation process. Key barriers to IEP implementation were found to include limited parental involvement; a lack of structural support at the school level; and negative attitudes arising from socioeconomic and cultural factors.

The current study suggests that the MoE should allocate specialists to ensure the provision of high quality services for special education. Investigation of the perspectives and needs of stakeholders demonstrates the need to focus on improving the understanding of IEP team members regarding their role in the inclusive education process. The Saudi government should take urgent steps to foster better collaboration between the MoE, DGSE and mainstream schools, as well as between the individual team members themselves. Governmental solutions should focus on the design and adoption of more appropriate assessment measures and the development of curricula that are specifically designed to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Through a closer link between informed policy and practice, IEP teams

can be empowered to work together more effectively to deliver IEP programmes that most effectively meet the needs of children with disabilities.

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