



From the decision on special education eligibility to an individual educational and therapeutic plan

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In my article I would like to show the complicated way from the decision about special education to individual educational and therapeutic plan. I am going to show how government statements are sometimes hard and complicated for parents, teachers and other specialists, who are looking after the children with special educational needs. I try to show everyday life in my job – teacher, specialist of pedagogical therapy. I hope my article will help and change our reality.

KEY WORDS: decision on special education eligibility, disability, special educational needs, special education, individual educational and therapeutic plan (IETP)

Foreword

In the Polish educational system, pupils eligible for special education may attend special schools, preschools or other institutions, or they may be taught in integration classes, within the framework of inclusive education¹. Because of the diversity of available meth-

¹ I. Chrzanowska, *Pedagogika specjalna. Od tradycji do współczesności*. Impuls, Kraków 2015; Szumski G *Integracyjne kształcenie niepełnosprawnych*. Wyd. Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej i Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 2013.

ods, the various elements of the system should be analysed so as to determine the quality of education – regardless of the choice of a particular school. Inclusive education in mainstream schools was introduced in Poland only several years ago, and there are still questions and doubts about effective pupil support. When a pupil eligible for special education comes to a mainstream school, the team of his teachers, based on the Regulation of the Polish Minister of Education on the terms of providing education and care to children and youth with disabilities, socially excluded or threatened by social exclusion², must develop an Individual Educational and Therapeutic Plan (IETP). This is a difficult job for mainstream school teachers who are not special educators. In this article, I want to present the problems that arise from the submission by a child's parent or legal guardian of a request for a decision on special education eligibility until development of an IETP as well as examples of good and bad practices and my practical experience in a psychological and educational counselling centre, associated with the development of those documents.

IETP – Individual Educational and Therapeutic Plan

On 1 September 2015, the Regulation of the Polish Minister of Education of 24 July 2015 on the terms of providing education and care for children and youth with disabilities, socially excluded or threatened by social exclusion³ entered into force. Previously, there were two separate regulations governing the education of those

² Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dla dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych, niedostosowanych społecznie i zagrożonych niedostosowaniem społecznym (JoL /Dz.U./ of 24 August 2017, item 1578).

³ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 24 lipca 2015 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dla dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych, niedostosowanych społecznie i zagrożonych niedostosowaniem społecznym JoL /Dz. U./ of 07.08.2015, item 1113

pupils: one in general or integration schools and the other in special schools – the 2015 Regulation introduces a common solution. It defines, among other things, ensuring special education and describes Individual Educational and Therapeutic Plans (IETP). Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji (Education Development Center, EDC) in Warsaw developed a document that contains both the legal bases of and practical advice for the development of IETPs⁴. In the Good Practices Bank of the Centre's Special Educational Needs Department, sample IETPs for pupils with various developmental problems are available⁵. They are very useful to mainstream school teachers who need methodical guidelines. Besides, presentation of different solutions is very valuable because, apart from the elements arising from the aforementioned Regulation, there are no standard models or forms of the IETPs. Each school may develop any form that is convenient, provided it complies with the criteria determined in the Regulation. It leaves a lot of freedom, but also increases the responsibility of a school and its teachers. Thus, it is important to understand the rules of developing IETPs, so as to be able to use them to the best of the needs of the teachers and specialists working with a disabled child at school. On 1 September 2017, provisions of the new Regulation of the Polish Minister of Education of 24 July 2015 on the terms of providing education and care for children and youth with disabilities, socially excluded or threatened by social exclusion entered into force. Those provisions discuss in detail the organisation of special education in various kinds of schools and institutions⁶.

⁴ J. Rafał-Luniewska, *Zmiany warunków organizowania kształcenia specjalnego*, ORE Warszawa 2015: <https://www.ore.edu.pl/component/phocadownload/category/77-inne?download=3450:zmiany-warunkow-organizowania-ksztalcenia-specjalnego-w-edukacji-ogolnodostepnej>

⁵ Cf. *Bank dobrych praktyk*, Portal internetowy Ośrodka Rozwoju Edukacji MEN, [online] <https://www.ore.edu.pl/programy-i-projekty-69647/bank-dobrych-praktyk-82894/dobre-praktyki> [access: 10.06.2017].

⁶ *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia, wychowania i opieki dla dzieci i młodzieży niepełnosprawnych, niedostosowanych społecznie i zagrożonych niedostosowaniem społecznym* (JoU./Dz.U./ of 24 August 2017, item 1578).

Developing IETP means planning support for a pupil eligible for special education. This is a difficult job for mainstream schools that do not have special educators. The competencies of mainstream school teachers are limited in this respect⁷, and they cannot be blamed for that. Despite the introduction of inclusion in Polish schools, there are no mandatory standards for teacher education in terms of special education. Dorota Podgórska-Jachnik writes that: *It is hard to make a school [mainstream school – M.W.] ready and open to receive a child with any kind of disability, based [only – M.W.] on additional specialist preparation of every teacher. This is simply impossible. Schools will try to bridge the gaps by shifting the burden of ensuring professionalism to the assistant teacher, counselling teacher and/or psychologist or school counsellor, and eventually, according to the assumption of the educational system reform that implements inclusion – to the entire school team responsible for special education*⁸.

The team responsible for a pupil with special educational needs includes all the teachers and specialists who work with the child, irrespective of the amount of time they spend with him. Each of them should, taking into account the specificity of a given subject, participate in developing the programme. When developing an IETP, its structure should be followed. The logic of developing an IETP covers three complementary levels:

Level I – diagnostic; its important elements are: through analysis of the decision on special education eligibility (diagnosis, recommendations, justification), multispecialist evaluation of child's

⁷ B. Jachimczak, *Special Pedagogue in a mainstream school – possibilities and limitations*, „Studia Edukacyjne” No. 7, pp. 233–239 Poznań 2008; Jachimczak B. *Przygotowanie nauczycieli wychowania przedszkolnego do realizacji wybranych zadań z zakresu pomocy psychologiczno-pedagogicznej*, „Studia Edukacyjne”, Poznań 2012, No. 21, p. 163–176; Plichta P. *Przygotowanie nauczycieli do edukacji włączającej – kontekst europejski*, [in:] D. Podgórska-Jachnik (ed.), *Dobre praktyki pedagogiczne szansą innowacyjnej edukacji*, Wyd. Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, Łódź 2012 s. 101–114, and other.

⁸ D. Podgórska-Jachnik, *Uwarunkowania i perspektywy edukacji włączającej osób z uszkodzonym słuchem*, [in:] E. Twardowska, M. Kowalska (ed.), *Edukacja niesłyszących*. Wyd. Polskiego Związku Głuchych w Łodzi, Łódź 2011, pp. 28–29.

functions (specialist tests at the preschool, school and counselling centre – psychological, logopedic and other, diagnosis by teachers, interview with parents), child's/pupil's special educational needs (identifying his needs).

Level II – planning; this is the main process of developing an IETP, which should cover, first of all: the therapeutic objectives – the principles of working with a child, the educational goals associated with the curriculum, i.e. determining the procedure for achieving the objectives, accommodating the environment to the educational requirements, the types of assistance and support.

Level III – practical; it covers specific actions undertaken to implement the plan, i.e.: support, classes (obligatory, additional, extra)⁹. The practical level also includes ongoing evaluation of the effects of work, the child's expected performance and evaluation of the plan¹⁰.

An EDC brochure describes the roles and duties of the school principal and the team of teachers working with a specific pupil, and his parents. It also mentions the term *functional diagnosis*, and explains its elements. This is important, because it is not possible to write a plan for a pupil with special educational needs based only on the label of a nosological diagnosis. Before writing an Individual Educational and Therapeutic Plan, it is very important that the respective teachers who teach or work with a child watch that child.

It is also worth noting another term arising from the Regulation: “multispecialist evaluation of pupil's/child's functions” (MEPF). In my opinion, this is the most important foundation of an Individual Educational and Therapeutic Plan. The evaluation covers: on the one hand, all the specialist medical certificates, possible medical histories, hospital discharge reports, opinions of specialists who take care of the child, decision on special education eligibility, and

⁹ *Podniesienie efektywności kształcenia uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi*, Materiały szkoleniowe Ministerstwa Edukacji Narodowej, Part II, Warszawa, 2010, po. 6–27.

¹⁰ J. Luniewska-Rafał, *Zmiany warunków kształcenia specjalnego*, Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, Warszawa 2015, p. 4.

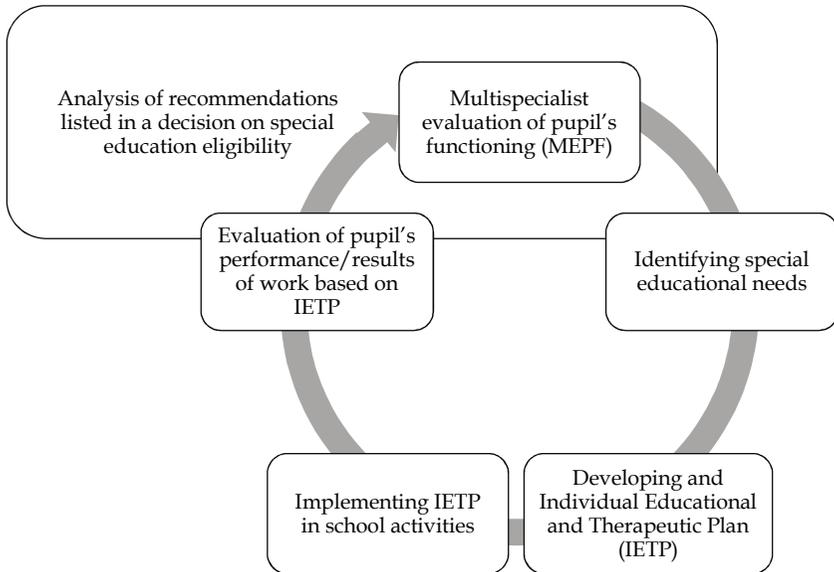


Fig. 1. The process of accommodating school education to pupil's special needs, taking into account the development of the MEPF and IETP (source: own elaboration, using I. Skibska, M. Warchał, 2011, p. 378¹¹)

on the other hand: teachers' and parents' observations and functional diagnosis performed at school according to the actual needs. I would like to emphasise in particular the second element. If we combine all those sources of information: medical diagnoses, opinions of school counsellors, psychologists and other specialists, with the opinion of teachers and parents – only then do we get a full picture of a child that will make it possible to develop the best IETP for him. It should be noted that a multispecialist evaluation of pupil's functions (MEPF) based on the abovementioned Regulation of the

¹¹ I. Skibska, M. Warchał (2011), *Edukacja inkluzyjna dziecka niepełnosprawnego w szkole ogólnodostępnej a integracja społeczna*, [in:] K. Denek et al. (ed.), *Edukacja Jutra w kontekście wyzwań współczesności*, Sosnowiec, Oficyna Wydawnicza „Humanitas”, pp. 369–386.

Polish Ministry of Education of 9 August 2017, the team of teachers who work with a specific child perform at least twice a year¹². Ideally, the first evaluation at the beginning of a year should be the input diagnosis for the IETP and the second should serve to evaluate the effects of work and possibly revise the IETP for the next school year/stage. This way, a certain logical cycle is created that reflects the procedural character of accommodating education to pupil's special needs.

The MEPF form¹³ contains a table with detailed questions and comments, so that each team may prepare the best evaluation of a pupil. Team meetings may be accompanied by a child's parent or legal guardian, and the school is obliged to notify them of the date of the team meeting. Teachers frequently make the mistake of not reading the decision on special education eligibility before a team meeting. I believe that every school should have a system – a set of procedures to be performed between the submission of such decision by a parent and the first team meeting. It is a good practice to familiarise parents with the proposed methods of work with a child both concerning the respective school subjects

and the type and quantity of special classes, e.g. speech therapy, specifying the number of hours and the schedule of those classes.

If we diligently perform the multispecialist evaluation of pupil's functions and in every subsequent MEPF properly evaluate our pupil, then developing the right IETP for a specific pupil and evaluating his performance should not be problematic.

Developing an Individual Educational and Therapeutic Plan

Because the main goal of the IETP is to help a child that requires special care and educational support, the plan should first of all be

¹² *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia...*, ibidem.

¹³ R. Cybulska (2017), *Uczeń ze specjalnymi potrzebami edukacyjnymi w systemie edukacji w świetle nowych przepisów prawa oświatowego*, Warszawa, ORE.

practical, i.e. it should translate to specific therapeutic activities. In the process of developing IETPs, the standard forms developed by specialists help clearly and logically describe the most important elements of the plan.

As has already been mentioned, there may be different IETP forms. Because there is no standard form, it is worth looking at some of the available alternatives, which I can recommend to other teachers from my own educational experience. In my opinion, the model developed by Romana Cybulska and Barbara Łaska¹⁴ is worth recommending, as well as the IETP form proposed by Monika Gołubiew-Konieczna¹⁵. In the latter case, the author emphasises the importance of identifying child's/pupil's strengths and weaknesses when watching and diagnosing him. It is enough to find just one area, one activity that a child/pupil can do well - his strength, to serve as the foundation for our therapeutic work.

The two IETPs seem different, but they both comply with the recommendations of the Regulation of the Ministry of Education of 9 August 2007. We can see some common elements in the two of them. They are: document information (name of the child, date of issuing the document, validity period, author of the document). The other common elements, provided for by the abovementioned Regulation, are: integrated activities of teachers and specialists who work with a child; forms and duration of psychological and educational assistance provided to a child or student, and the number of hours of the respective forms of assistance; scope of cooperation between teachers and specialists and the parents of a child or student in performing the tasks identified in the decision on special

¹⁴ R. Cybulska, B. Łaskam, Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, Wydział Specjalnych Potrzeb Edukacyjnych, aktualności, access: 08.11.2017, <https://www.ore.edu.pl/onas/wydzialy/specjalnych-potrzeb-edukacyjnych/7878-ksza%C5%82cienie-specjalne-%E2%80%93-propozycje-arkuszy>

¹⁵ Monika Gołubiew-Konieczna, director of the counseling centre, director of the Psychological and Educational Counseling Centre no. 7 in Gdańsk, psychologist, intellectual disability teacher, author of numerous publications on working with pupils with special educational needs.

education eligibility by the preschool, school or institution (other recommendations, specialist devices, other assistance); if need be, the scope of cooperation with psychological and educational counselling centres; regular multispecialist evaluation of child's/pupil's functions, taking into account the effectiveness of the psychological and educational assistance provided to a pupil (as has already been mentioned – at least once per school year).

The form developed by Romana Cybulska and Barbara Łaska may be recommended in particular to those who like to put information into tables. I know many such teachers. They claim that tables are easier to put information in order and easier to use. Division into rows and columns prevents dispersion of data and makes us sure that we will not forget anything. Opponents of this approach say that tables are limiting – they impose a certain style and predetermined actions, it is stereotypical and hinders inventiveness. Thus, the second IETP form, developed by Monika Gołubiew-Konieczna, gives more freedom, but it does not contain detailed examples of specific content that could be used in the respective parts of the IETP. Educational counsellors at the Regional Centres for Teacher Education (RCTE) and the Internet offer numerous IETP forms (unfortunately, not all of them are correct). I believe that every team of teachers can choose something for themselves. Of course, neither of the two examples presented by me in this article is fixed. They may be modified or adapted to create an individual plan. The important thing is to remember to include all the elements required by the Regulation. My suggestion is to choose one unified model for a given school, accepted by the teachers of that school. It is not a good practice to create many different forms, however, it is a very good idea to create a model tailored to the specific school. IETP is a working tool and as such, it needs to be accepted by the persons who are going to use it in their everyday work. Thus, it is worth discussing the structure of the IETP and making it the subject of a self-learning debate of the Teacher Board, and modifying it, if need be. It should be a normal process of improving the working methods of the school personnel.

The basic document that makes it possible to adjust the IETP to pupil's needs is a decision of special education eligibility issued by a public psychological and educational counselling centre. Such decision has a specific validity period and it is usually issued for a given part of education – and the IETP should cover the same period. The decision contains elements that are necessary to plan pupil support and specific accommodation and rehabilitation activities to be undertaken by the school: the diagnosis, recommendations and their justification. Only those activities planned by the school that are compliant with the recommendations listed in a decision will be financed by the school's governing authority. So, the decision both sets the direction of and serves as a framework for accommodation and rehabilitation activities.

The diagnosis contained in a decision informs about child's problems as well as his developmental possibilities and potential. This should be reflected in his Individual Educational and Therapeutic Plan. It sometimes happens, however, that schools complain about improper decisions. Another obstacle may be the teachers' inability to read and interpret them. This is an area for mutual care, and good cooperation between the school and the counselling centre makes it possible to improve the language of communication. One way to achieve it is to use the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) in developing a decision. The Ministry of Education has developed new forms of decisions based on the new classification, and more specifically – on its version for children and youth ICF-CY (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health – Children and Youth)¹⁶. On 7 September 2017, the Ministry published a new regulation on opinions and decisions that includes their new forms and new principles for issuing them¹⁷. This regulation enables the chair of a team

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 7 września 2017 r. w sprawie orzeczeń i opinii wydawanych przez zespoły orzekające działające w publicznych poradniach psychologiczno – pedagogicznych (Dz. U. 2017, poz. 1743)

issuing a decision to ask a school principal/ institution director for an opinion that is necessary for that decision. The form prepared by a school/institution is fully based on the ICF and pupil's strengths¹⁸.

A correct IETP provides information, among other things, on: the curriculum appropriate for our pupil, the somatic diseases he has been diagnosed with, the number and type of suggested specialist activities, the pupil's functioning in a group, his social competencies, the degree of his mental and physical competencies, his performance with respect to his age, and his potential, i.e. possibilities for development and strengths. In case of questions, the counselling centre may be contacted and asked to interpret or supplement the diagnostic picture, and this should be done in order to avoid mistakes that will have a negative effect on the pupil.

The recommendations provided in a decision specify the pupil support vision developed by a counseling centre. They concern in particular: the suggested form of teaching that will be the most beneficial for a child, the forms of stimulation, rehabilitation activities, therapy, enhancement, developing the child's potential and strengths, and other psychological and educational assistance; the conditions of providing for educational needs¹⁹. The type of disability, determined through specialist diagnosis, determines the level of adaptation optimal for a given pupil and the resulting scope of rehabilitation²⁰. This serves as direct input for profiling individual rehabilitation activities for a specific child. The Regulation lists some possible forms of individual rehabilitation, e.g.: teaching spatial orientation and mobility, teaching Braille language or alternative communication methods (blind pupils), teaching sign language or alternative communication methods (deaf or aphasic pupils), or

¹⁸ Pursunat to §7.1 Rozporządzenia Ministerstwa Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 7 września 2017 r. w sprawie orzeczeń i opinii wydawanych, *ibid*.

¹⁹ Dudzińska A., Niedźwiedzka A. (2016), *Najczęstsze pytania dotyczące kształcenia specjalnego informator dla rodziców*, [online] <http://niegrzecznedzieci.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/WszystkoJasne-Raport-Najcze%CC%A8stsze-Pytania-Do%CC%A8ce-Kszta%C5%82cienia-Specjalnego.pdf> [access: 20.05.2017], p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 67.

teaching social skills, including communication (pupils with autism, including the Asperger syndrome)²¹, but these may also be rehabilitation activities focusing on other competencies. It is recommended to teach cognitive processes to pupils with intellectual disabilities. If need be, a counseling centre may also recommend, apart from rehabilitation activities, also specialist activities that constitute an element of psychological and educational pupil support in the Polish educational system. All the recommendations of a counseling centre should be justified – this is another mandatory part of a decision, useful for teachers developing an IETP.

Although a decision on special education eligibility is the basic document to develop an IETP, it is not about copying the content of one document to another, but about activating a process of heuristic search for strategic solutions. Thus, I suggest that before developing an IETP, each teacher participating in its development or each team ask themselves the following four important and simple questions concerning a pupil:

- a. What is the pupil's (key) problem?
- b. Whys does he have this problem?
- c. How can the pupil be helped?
- d. Why do we choose this particular method?

If IETP is preceded by careful observation and good diagnosis of a child, answering those questions should not be problematic. If a teacher consults his answers with the opinion of other teachers, specialists and parents, he will be solid foundations for an IETP.

A frequent mistake made when developing an IETP is being too detailed about specific tasks, which hinders the flexibility of action. If the plan is to be practical, it should be rather concise, so that a teacher may keep it "in his head" and follow its assumptions at all times when working with a pupil. This means providing relatively general, though specific, given the individual nature of the plan, directives and methods, and their accommodations, that are easy to

²¹ *Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 9 sierpnia 2017 r. w sprawie warunków organizowania kształcenia...*, *ibid.*

remember and implement every day, in every class, in every situation. This should also translate to the identification of goals, which should be neither too general, nor too distant, nor such that evade interim evaluation (MEPF). It is better to plan smaller steps that can be controlled rather than too big ones that make it impossible to capture the dynamics of changes. The goals formulated for an IETP should be verified from such angle, so that they are easier to evaluate later on.

Finally, it should be noted once again that a good IETP is not a document for the persons who control a school/institution that rests in a colourful binder but rather a tool for everyday educational work. It helps adapt the teaching process and prepare appropriate materials, and it helps a child/pupil with disabilities be successful. Let him be very successful and let us make him happy. It is worth remembering those simple rules for working with a special educational needs pupil when developing all kinds of documentation that concern him. The child should not be forgotten about in the complex documentation process.

Conclusion

The process from a decision to IETP presented in this article is not simple, although it may seem so. A decision developed by a public psychological and educational counseling centre and delivered to a school means that the school has to develop an MEPF and IETP. The most important aspect for working with a pupil is to develop an IETP in such a way that it may serve as a signpost for the teachers and specialists who work with the pupil. The legislation I quoted says that the team of teachers working with a pupil eligible for special education should meet at least twice and that the parents should be informed of the dates of such meetings. The role of parents in developing an IETP should be analysed. Cooperation with parents may be the key to success. Teachers of subjects that are taught for only one hour in a week must participate in the work of

multiple teams. Especially in smaller schools, team meetings require appropriate logistics. They also generate unwillingness and fatigue of teachers, who must devote a lot of their extra time to such meetings. The effort contributed to developing a sound working plan, and in particular a relevant functional diagnosis, should – thanks to joint and informed actions – ensure optimal development of a pupil, despite his limitations. It is possible, although various tasks concerning special educational needs on the border between a counseling centre – a school/preschool, without proper organisation and support, still cause many unnecessary tensions and misunderstandings.

I hope that after reading this article, the road to IETP will be somewhat easier than before. It will determine certain possibilities to reorganise work in schools/preschools so that supporting children with disabilities in mainstream school will be much more practical, expedient and relevant.

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