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THE CHALLENGE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION NOVICE TEACHERS IN BUILDING OF INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

ABSTRACT. Bar Nava, *The Challenge of Special Education Novice Teachers in Building of Individualized Education Program for Special Needs Students* [Wyzwania stojące przed początkującymi nauczycielami nauczania specjalnego przygotowującymi zindywidualizowane programy edukacyjne dla uczniów ze specjalnymi potrzebami]. *Studia Edukacyjne* nr 55, 2019, Poznań 2019, pp. 283-294. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 1233-6688. DOI: 10.14746/se.2019.55.17

The individualized education program (IEP) constitutes a main component in the formation and adjustment of special education services, the supports, and the teaching for special needs students. It is based on the recognition of the differences among special needs students and the need to provide an answer to this diversity. This article presents findings of a longitudinal qualitative study, conducted among thirty special education novice teachers (SENTs) in Israel. The study examined the perceptions of the SENTs on the continuum of the induction year, regarding the obligation, anchored in the Special Education Law (1988), to build IEPs to their special needs students – already in their first steps of their entry into teaching, and the support they received for coping with this challenge.

Key words: Special Education; Individualized Education Program (IEP); Special Education Novice Teacher (SENT); Induction Year

Special Education Novice Teachers' Challenges in the Induction Year

The stage of entry into the teaching profession is a distinct stage on the continuum of the professional development of teachers and is described in many research studies in Israel and in the world as the most important and significant period in the process of the teachers' professional development. The nature of the entry into the teaching profession affects the novice teachers' professional

future, their role perception, and the formation of their professional identity.¹ Alongside the professional and personal challenges that beginning teachers face, the beginning of the path in teaching is described in the literature as one of the most complex, difficult, and critical periods in teachers' career.² The research literature engages at length, reports of beginning teachers about their challenges and notes a series of prominent and frequent difficulties.³ Moreover, the research literature emphasize that special education novice teachers have unique challenges and difficulties in the entry into teaching which are additional to those of novice teachers who work in general education.⁴

The challenges of the SENTs stem from lack of sufficient knowledge about the inclusion policy, regulations and procedures, and the large amount of paperwork that derives from this policy. Additional challenges relate to the inclusion of students with special needs in the general education framework, in providing teaching suited to a large number of students with diverse disabilities and abilities, in coping with pupils who set complex behavioral challenges, in teaching according to the general education curricula, in lack of support from colleagues and management in issues regarding SENTs' work, and also challenges that stem from the feeling of isolation, role ambiguity, workload, and lack of time and resources.⁵ These challenges cause to the dropout of many

¹ S. Zilbershtrum, *The stage of the entry into the teaching profession: In the mirror of theory and research*, [in:] *On the continuum: Training, induction, and teachers' professional development – Policy, theory, and practice*, Eds S. Shimoni, A. Avidav-Unger, Tel-Aviv 2013, p. 101-131.

² H. Tam, *Is the support of absorption effective for the professional development of beginning teachers? Findings of a longitudinal research*, Pages, 2005, 39, p. 66-84; D. Pritzker, D. Chen, *Burnout factors in teaching among teachers in the initial years of their work*, Studies and Research in Teacher Education, 2010, 12, p. 94-131.

³ L. Darling-Hammond, *Keeping good teachers: Why it matters, what leaders can do*, Educational Leadership, 2003, 60, p. 6-13; S. Feiman-Nemser, *What new teachers need to learn*. Educational Leadership, 2003, 60, 8, p. 25-29; S. Moore-Johnson, *Teacher unions can support new teachers' desire for assistance and professional growth while aiding teacher effectiveness*, American Educator, 2006, 30, p. 9-45; I. Harrari, E. Eldar, H. Shechter, "With this I came home today" – Significant events in the eyes of novice teachers (interns) in their first year of work, In *Movement*, 2007, 8, 3-4, p. 335-360.

⁴ T.W. Busch et al., *Teaching students with learning disabilities: Perceptions of a first-year teacher*, Journal of Special Education, 2001, 35, p. 92-99; V. MacDonald, D.L. Speece, *Making time: A teacher's report on her first-year of teaching children with emotional disabilities*, Journal of Special Education, 2001, 35, p. 84-91; M.A. Mastropieri, *Challenges encountered by first-year special education teachers*, Journal of Special Education, 2001, 35, p. 66-74; K.L. Kilgore et al., *The problems of beginning Special education teachers: Exploring the contextual factors influencing their work*, Action in Teacher Education, 2003, 25, 1, p. 38-47.

⁵ T.W. Busch et al., *Teaching students with learning disabilities*; M.A. Mastropieri, *Challenges encountered by first-year special education teachers*; S.D. Whitaker, *Needs of beginning special education teachers: Implications for teacher education*, Teacher Education and Special Education, 2003, 26, 2, p. 106-117; B.S. Billingsley, B. Carlson, S. Klein, *The working conditions and induction support of early career special educators*, Exceptional Children, 2004, 70, p. 333-347.

SENTs from the educational system in the first five working years,⁶ while the number of students with special needs who need services of special education is steadily increasing.⁷ This fact can affect the quality of services that special needs students get.⁸ SENTs who dropped out from the education system reported being lacking of support and appropriate preparation for their role. Moreover, the literature indicates that the support programs and other activities for the novice teachers are not specifically designed for SENTs.⁹ Therefore, the identification and understanding of the unique challenges of SENTs may shed light on planning and executing appropriate support solutions for coping with their challenges, in order to lead them to better and effective professional functioning and will lead to their remaining in the educational system.

Characteristics of Individualized Education Program (IEP)

The IEP is a main important component in the work of special education teachers, therefore it is a central challenging task that SENTs are facing when they entry into teaching. The IEP is a written document that describes the individualized educational plan that set for the special needs students and includes the special education services, support, and teaching for them. It is based on the recognition of the differences among special needs students and the need to provide responses to this diversity.¹⁰ This approach is consistent with the principle of 'quality of life' upon which the work with special needs students is based.¹¹ The construction of the IEP is an obligation anchored in

⁶ B.S. Billingsley et al., *A review of teacher induction in special education: Research, practice, and technology solutions* (National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development Document No. RS-1), 2009; R.D. Fantilli, D.E. McDougall, *A study of novice teachers: Challenges and supports in the first years*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2009, 25, p. 814-825; R.M. Ingersoll, M. Strong, *The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers: A critical review of the research*, *Review of Educational Research*, 2011, 81, p. 201-233.

⁷ G.R. Swanson, N. Murri, *Beginning special educators' intent to stay in special education: Why they like it here*, *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 2006, 29, 3, p. 179-190.

⁸ B.S. Billingsley, *Special education teacher retention and attrition: A critical analysis of the research literature*, *The Journal of Special Education*, 2004, 38, 1, p. 39-55.

⁹ C.C. Griffin et al., *New teacher induction in Special Education*, Gainesville, FL, 2003; M. Bay, M. Parker-Katz, *Perspectives on induction of beginning special educators: Research summary, key program features, and the state of state-level policies*, *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 2009, 32, p. 17-32.

¹⁰ C. Igel, S. Malichi, *Special Education Law – Social, value-oriented, and professional reflection on policy design and its implementation*, [in:] *Inclusiveness: Learners with disabilities in educational systems*, Eds S. Reiter, Y. Leyser, G. Avissar, Haifa 2007, p. 143-154; P. Shavit, D. Tal, *Teaching in an inclusive classroom: Contemporary trends and issues*, [in:] *Inclusiveness: From theory to practice*, Eds S. Reiter, G. Avissar, Haifa 2013, p. 131-160.

¹¹ R.L. Schalock, *Introduction and overview to the special issue on quality of life*, *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 2005, 10, p. 695-698.

legislation in the special education Law in Israel (1988; Amendment 7, 2002),¹² as well as in other countries such as the federal law in the United States – The Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA, 2004).¹³

The IEP constitutes a framework for the planning of the tailored work with the special needs student according to his personal needs and is built at the beginning of every school year, and is summarized at the end of the school year. The IEP includes description of the special needs student's abilities and strength and the functional performance at the time of the IEP preparation in the various areas of his functioning – learning, behavioral, emotional, physical, sensory.¹⁴ The plan presents the annual goals and aims set for the students, the duration to achieve them, the means and teaching methods required to achieve them and – the criteria for measuring the assessment of their achievement. In addition, the IEP specifies the accommodations, modifications and alternatives required according to the needs of the student, his functional performance, his disabilities and his age, and the special support given to him such as a personal assistant, devices, and unique aids.¹⁵ The student and his parents are partners in the process of the construction and implementation of the IEP.¹⁶

The construction, implementation and monitoring of the implementation of the IEP is a process that led by the homeroom teacher with the partnership and involvement of the interdisciplinary school team. The variety of professional skills of the interdisciplinary members and the sharing of information are essential for the holistic view of the student when preparing and implementing the IEP that can be based on accurate and relevant description of the child's strengths and weaknesses in many different settings.¹⁷ This indicates that the role of the special education teacher in building IEP necessitates knowledge and skills in the field of functional assessment, in setting of goals, in assessment methods and more. In addition, his role necessitates teamwork and collaboration skills due to his need to establish an ongoing process of connection, shared work and cooperation with the interdisciplinary school

¹² *The Special Education Law, 5748-1988*, State of Israel, section 19; *The Special Education Law 5762-2002 (Amendment No. 7)*, State of Israel, section 20f.

¹³ *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. IDEA, 2004. United States of America.

¹⁴ *The Special Education Law, 1988*. State of Israel; S.W. Smith, *Creating useful individualized education programs (IEPs)*, Washington, DC, (ERIC, Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted, Arlington, VA, No. ED449636), 2000.

¹⁵ C. Igel, S. Malichi, *Special Education Law*; S.W. Smith, *Creating useful individualized education programs*.

¹⁶ *The Special Education Law, 1988*, State of Israel; *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. IDEA, 2004; R. Hillel Lavian, *Artists of weaving: The role complexity of the special education teacher*, *Issues in special education and Rehabilitation*, 2008, 23, p. 37-51.

¹⁷ S.W. Smith, *Creating useful individualized education programs*; I. Manor-Binyamini, *Teamwork in interdisciplinary teams: Theory, research, and implementation*, Jerusalem 2009.

team and the students' parents, for the achievement of the goals set out in the IEP for each student.¹⁸

Methodology

This article is focused on findings of research study conducted in Israel that examined the perceptions of SENTs regarding the challenge in the construction of IEPs during their induction year, as well as the support they received for the fulfillment of this obligation. Since the study examined challenges of novice teachers it based on the *qualitative-constructivist paradigm* that assumes that a phenomena can be understood only from the perspective of those who experience it and are part of the phenomenon, and that perceives the context of the phenomena as vital to understanding its reality.¹⁹

Selecting the Study Participants

The perceptions of the SENTs were examined among 30 SENTs from Israel who worked in the different educational frameworks in which students with special needs study, that committed to participate in three stages of the research process throughout their induction year. The participants are graduates of three Universities and seven academic colleges of education. They were chosen in 'purposeful sample' focusing on deliberate selection of participants representing in the best manner a wide range of SENTs in the researched population.²⁰ The SENTs' selection criteria were as follows: (1) Ten participants from each framework in which special education teachers are assigned to in Israel: *inclusion framework* for special needs students who are integrated in general education schools; *special education classes* in general schools; and, *special education schools*; (2) SENTs from the three mentioned educational frameworks who work with students from a wide range of disabilities; (3) SENTs who work in elementary and middle schools. However, as some of the special education schools in Israel are designated for students aged 6 to 21, some of the research participants worked with students from these ages; (4) SENTs who have graduated from colleges and from universities and belong to the different tracks of teacher education; (5) SENTs that fill different teaching roles.

Research Instruments and the Data Collection Process

The examination of SENTs perceptions *on the continuum of the induction year* constituted the consideration in choosing a qualitative *longitudinal re-*

¹⁸ R. Hillel Lavian, *Artists of weaving*.

¹⁹ R.E. Stake, *The art of case study research*, London 1995; A. Shkedi, *Words of Meaning: Qualitative Research - Theory and Practice*, Tel Aviv 2015.

²⁰ A. Shkedi, *Words of Meaning: Qualitative Research*.

search design. The study was conducted during one school year – a duration that suits the core definition of a longitudinal study.²¹ Qualitative longitudinal research is predicated on the investigation and interpretation of change over time and the process in social contexts²². Hence, the data have been collected at three points of time: (1) At the beginning of the school year (in the months of October and November) – semi structured interviews were conducted with the participants; (2) At the end of the first half of the school year (at the end of January) – open-ended questionnaire was sent via email to the research participants and they were asked to fill it out and send it via return email; and, (3) At the end of the second half of the school year (in the months of May and June) – semi structured interviews were conducted with the participants. The data collection at three points of time during the entire school year enabled extensive data collection through increasing the number of research encounters with the 30 participants –total 90 research encounters during the school year in which the research was conducted.

Findings and Discussion

The data analysis was performed through content analysis of the transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews and the open-ended questionnaire.²³

Lack of Familiarity, Knowledge and Experience of the SENTs in Building IEP

The SENTs who are responsible for the building of the IEPs, noted already at the beginning of the school year their lack of familiarity with the IEP subject and knowledge of its building, which caused them frustration. They said: “If I hadn’t asked and I hadn’t been requested to do this (IEP) – I would not know how to do it”; “I never built an IEP”; “I knew ahead of time that this will be difficult since ... I am doing this for the first time ... I built it and I thought that this was an excellent IEPs. I discovered ... that what I did apparently was a class learning program”. The SENTs explained their lack of knowledge in building IEP by the fact that they did not learn this subject in the framework of teacher education, or that the topic was learned superficially: “ To write an IEP – they did not teach us in the studies ... we learned to write it technically

²¹ K. Woodfield, D. Molloy, J. Bacon, *Longitudinal qualitative approaches in evaluation studies*, London 2003.

²² J. Holland, R. Thomson, S. Henderson, *Qualitative longitudinal research: A discussion paper*, London, 2006.

²³ A. Shkedi, *Words of Meaning: Qualitative Research*.

and really briefly”; “Only ten minutes were dedicated to this and it was in the last lesson ... they did not really tell us how to build IEP, they simply said – this is the pattern, go ahead”; “At the end of the year [of studies] I learned it, really at the end ... and a moment before I started to teach. This year I built IEPs ... this requires far more professional discretion”. Similar findings were found in study conducted by Whitaker (2003), according to which many SENTs reported that they did not receive in the period of their studies any training related to building IEPs.²⁴

The SENTs’ statements indicate fundamentally technical reference to the topic of the IEP. They focused on its structure and components, with the goal of meeting the commitment and submitting it immediately as required as they described: “I must prepare the IEPs ... this is simply to prepare it in order that it will later be filed in the binder”. This technical approach characterizes the novice teachers’ survival behavior at the start of their path.²⁵ The survival behavior is expressed by the technical performance of tasks to which novice teachers are committed to in the shortest term, without deepening and without observation of their broad context. Reinforcement of the technical perception of the SENTs arises from the fact that only few of them addressed in the beginning of the school year the IEP as a vital instrument for the professional work with their class students. They noted: “Because I have not written the IEPs yet I do not have something to work with. I do not have goals for each student”; “For every child that I type the IEP ... I already think about the learning strategy ... the document greatly helps”.

Despite the fact that the IEP is supposed to constitute a basis for the special education teacher’s work with his students throughout the entire school year, only one interviewee addressed in the continuation of the year the use of the IEPs in her work and its contribution. In the first half of the school year she said: “The building of the IEPs was the high point in terms of my difficulties ... but the moment I finished the building of the IEPs number of things started to change ... the IEPs helped me in the organization of the goals and the objectives for the students and focused me on the preparation of the teaching materials”. At the second half of the year she noted: “The IEPs is what helped me and got me out of the shock that I was in. I needed something that would guide me and this is exactly what the IEPs did – [gave me direction] about what to work, what to promote onward, and what to repeat in the lesson”.

²⁴ S.D. Whitaker, *Needs of beginning special education teachers*.

²⁵ F.F. Fuller, O.H. Brown, *Becoming a teacher*, [in:] *Teacher education*, (The 74th yearbook of the national society for the study of education. Part 2), Ed K. Ryan, Chicago 1975, p. 25-52; P.F. Conway, C.M. Clark, *The journey inward and outward: A re-examination of Fuller’s concerns-based model of teacher development*, *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 2003, 19, p. 465-482; H. Tam, *Is the support of absorption effective*.

At the beginning of the school year, the SENTs were required to dedicate considerable time to the building of the IEPs, as evidenced in their statements: "During the weekend, I worked only on the IEPs ... since I did not finish preparing lesson plans ... I have feelings of guilt ... but [the building of] every IEP takes me a lot of time"; "In the building of the IEPs ... my difficulty is mainly the issue of the burden. I did not think that I would experience in this way my entry into teaching, to the children. I would like to reach the children with a clearer head and with strength to invest efforts in them". The SENTs' insufficient knowledge caused load, which burdened them in the first year of their work: "This [the IEP] adds to me burden ... I devoted to this lots of time. If I knew to build [IEP], this could have been avoided. It could have already been over". The dedication of time and the load that stemmed from the construction of the IEPs constituted a difficulty since it was added to the various tasks and assignments to which they are committed in the framework of their role such as the process of getting to know students, conducting assessments for the students, preparing group and class learning programs, and more. These tasks, which are a part of every special education teacher work and duties routine in the beginning of the school year, are added to the SENTs encounter with a new and unfamiliar work environment as they described: "The lack of time is the main difficulty in the work ... you do not know where to begin and what to do first ... There are many things to do during the year, report cards, IEPs, formative assessments"; "To attempt to prepare materials for the students ... to assess them and to understand in which situation each one is found and also ... to begin to write IEPs that I did not know this before ... this does not end".

These challenges are commensurate with difficulties of SENTs that have mentioned in the literature.²⁶ However, a significant finding, which did not previously arise in the literature, indicated that most of the SENTs who are not homeroom teachers in the special education class frameworks and some of those who are not homeroom teachers in the special education schools were not involved in the building of the IEPs. They noted that they worked according to IEPs written by the homeroom teachers, as a 'fait accompli': "We have the binders in the classroom ... they contain the IEPs. I read and look in them and acted accordingly"; "The homeroom teacher builds the IEPs herself". The absence of responsibility for building the IEPs gave one of the SENTs a feel-

²⁶ T.W. Busch et al., *Teaching students with learning disabilities*; Mastropieri, *Challenges encountered by first-year special education teachers*; S.D. Whitaker, *Needs of beginning special education teachers*; S.D. Whitaker, *Needs of beginning special education teachers*; M. Bay, M. Parker-Katz, *Perspectives on induction of beginning special educators*; B.S. Billingsley et al., *A review of teacher induction in special education*.

ing that "I am a teacher but not a teacher ... I do not have responsibility ... to build the IEPs". The recognition of the experience as a significant and essential component of learning received main expression already in the educational thought of Dewey in the beginning of the twentieth century. Dewey (1933) defined the learning as a re-organization of experience, which adds to the meaning of the existing experience and broadens the ability to direct the course of the following experience.²⁷ The lack of experience with the building of the IEP in the year in which the SENTs are accompanied with support and instruction may have influence on their ability to build professional IEPs for their students in the continuation of their path.

SENTs' Expectations for Support, and the Actual Support they Received in the Process of Building IEPs

The SENTs who filled a role of homeroom teachers expected to receive instruction for the building of the IEP, as they detailed: "that the teacher who begins to work will have instruction ... until the end of October, the deadline for completing the IEPs - what is IEP ... the table template, how to build it, what is expected of her. There must be more instruction"; "I would expect to receive an example ... to see how they expect it to be built ... from the teacher who accompanies me [the mentor teacher] ... from the beginning and until the end and getting tips from her how to do this more effectively". A possible explanation is that it is likely that SENTs expect that the school will continue to train them, as something obvious, from the recognition that they are in the transition stage between the 'training world' and the 'professional world' - the school, in which expertise in the writing of the IEP is required. Nevertheless, it seems that the schools assume that the SENTs, who are graduates for special education teaching, come to their role when they are equipped with the knowledge required of them in the field of their specialization as described by one of the SENTs: "The school principal said that I need to build IEPs for the students. I asked how to build it and she said: 'you come from special education, you need to know'". It is apparent that there is an essential gap between the way in which the schools perceive the SENTs' knowledge with their entry into their role and the knowledge they actually obtained in their training.

Most of the SENTs received support in actuality in building the IEPs, but the support was not uniform - they received support from different professionals and in different ways as they noted: (1) Instruction in the process of building IEPs: "I told her [the mentor teacher] that I need help in building

²⁷ J. Dewey, *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*, Buffalo, NY 1933.

IEPs ... within a few days we met"; "She [the district instructor] scheduled for us an instruction meeting, to show us ... how to build [the IEP] for one specific child"; "We [the new teachers] receive instruction gradually ... the principal did something called a 'gift child', which is to choose two children ... with whom it is hard to work and to write all their positive traits and the goals we set for them ... and gradually we begin to build the IEPs [for them]"; (2) Getting a prepared example of an IEP as a model: "The special education teachers gave me a prepared plan and showed me how to build IEP"; "I asked for help from the more experienced teachers ... an example of an IEP they built, I read this in order to see what is expected of me"; (3) Building the IEP along with another staff member in the special education schools: "I worked [on the IEP] along with the para-therapeutic caregiver"; "The IEP - I built 'hand in hand' with the mentor teacher ... I do not know the students well enough ... she sharpened for me things that apparently I would not have noticed - a full partnership". It was found that the support and assistance the SENTs from the special education schools received stemmed from the staff and school culture anchored in the teaching language of special education. In contrast, in the frameworks of inclusion and special education classes, the school staff does not have training in special education and they rely, naturally, on special education professionals such as the mentor teacher and the special education instructors, whose role is to support them professionally.

Conclusion and Recommendations

By asking the question "*What is the IEP?*" the SENTs expressed their challenge in the building of the IEP for their special needs students in the induction year. This challenge stemmed from their lack of familiarity, knowledge, and experience in building of the IEP which they claimed, was not taught in teacher education or superficially studied. As a result, the SENTs used survival mechanisms that are characterized by performance of short-term actions that reflect a technical-instrumental approach - They built the IEP but they did not rely on it during the school year as a professional tool in their work with their students, while the IEP is supposed to form a basis for a tailored work with them. It can be concluded that there is a close linkage between inadequate training in teacher education for work with special needs students at schools, and the increased use of unprofessional survival mechanisms by the SENTs. Hence, it is necessary to rethink and to plan anew the training of special education pre-service students in order to prepare them already in the 'training world' to the challenges and difficulties they will meet in the 'school world'.

Facing the challenge of building the IEP, most of the SENTs received support. It is noticeable that the special education schools hold perception of support and it is an inseparable part of their educational culture. However, in the frameworks of the general education the SENTs get support only from a few of professionals whose duty was to support them. In addition, it is apparent that there is a gap between the SENTs and the schools regarding their readiness to their role as special education teachers. While the SENTs expect that the school will recognize their situation as a stage of transition between the 'training world' and the 'working world' and will support them in the learning and the building of the IEP, it seems that the schools expect that they will be equipped with professional tools by virtue of their training for their profession. It is only right that the educational system – the policy shapers and schools, will be aware and will recognize the special status of the SENTs as learners in between the 'worlds' during the induction year, who are undergoing a process of professional socialization to the role, and therefore will support them by understanding them, showing patience towards them and providing specific assistance according to their needs. Appropriate preparation of the SENTs in teacher training for the various components of their role and reference to the SENTs as still in a continuous process of learning may reduce, to some extent, their sense of overload in the entry into teaching.

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