

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY**

**A case study of educators' understanding and use of Individualized Program Plans**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Educators' understanding of the development and use of Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) was examined using a qualitative case study design. A total of twenty- four participants from the provincial, school board and school levels were interviewed regarding their perceptions of IPP development and use. Data was also collected through a content analysis of provincial and school board documents and through surveys completed by school based educators. Results indicated that although educators at all three levels of the educational system shared a basic understanding of the IPP as an instructional guide and a tool for accountability, educators at the provincial, school board and school levels had differing views of the role of parents and general education teachers in the development and use of IPPs. The implications of the results for the development and use of Individualized Program Plans, as well as the need for further research on IPPs, are discussed.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter begins by providing the background to the research problem and explaining the purpose and significance of the research. The next section provides a brief overview of the methodology used for the study and concludes with an outline of the organization of the thesis.

#### **Background to the Study**

Students with special needs are students who require modifications to the regular curriculum, staffing, instructional and evaluation strategies, resources, facilities or equipment in order to meet their unique educational needs (Alberta Education, 1995, Winzer, 1993). In order to assist in the provision of education to students identified as having special needs, Alberta Education requires that all students with special needs have an Individualized Program Plan (Alberta Education, 1997a; 1995). An Individualized Program Plan (IPP) is a written commitment of intent by an educational team whose purpose is to ensure appropriate planning for exceptional students, to serve as a working document, and to act as a record of student progress (Alberta Education, 1995).

In mandating the development of Individualized Program Plans for students with special needs, Alberta Education has followed the example of American special education policy. In 1975 the United States introduced Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for all students with special needs with the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). The United States Congress defined an Individualized Education Plan as a written statement developed by a multidisciplinary team which indicated a student's current level of educational performance as well as annual goals and objectives for the student (Goodman & Bond, 1993). The American

commitment to Individualized Education Plans for students with special needs was re-affirmed in 1990 with the passage of Public Law 101-467, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which re-authorized P.L. 94-142 (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994). In addition to assuring program planning and implementation, the IEP was intended to provide opportunities for input to individuals involved with exceptional students, to monitor student progress, and to enhance accountability through periodic reviews (Goodman & Bond, 1993; Smith, 1990).

Individualized plans in both Alberta and the United States share several basic premises regarding their purpose, development and use. First, individualized plans in both Alberta and the United States are based on the belief that "a combination of personnel [input] guarantees an efficient and effective IEP" (Smith, 1990). In particular, the active participation of parents and students in the development of individualized plan is perceived as being critical to the successful development and implementation of the individualized program (McNamara, 1986; Van Reusen & Bos, 1990). Studies have suggested that active parental participation in the IPP process results in greater parental satisfaction with programming and placement decision as well as more positive parental attitudes towards teachers and schools (Abrahamson, Wilson, Yoshida & Haggerty, 1983; Margolis, Brannigan, & Kearing, 1981). Studies of student involvement in the development of individualized plans indicate that student participation encourages student independence, self-management, and co-operation with teachers (Schunk, 1985; Mickler, 1984; Peters, 1990). Gerber, Banbury, Miller & Griffin (1986) concluded that "positive attitudes toward the IEP process and outcomes result when participants view the proceedings as a decision-making forum or as a vehicle for effectively actualizing mutually agreed-upon plans" (p.15).

In addition to parent and student involvement in developing individualized plans, general education teachers are also viewed as being crucial to the development process.

Pugach (1982) argued that collaboration between general and special education teachers in the development of individualized plans promotes shared decision making and "encourages consistent curricular modifications across instructional objectives" (p.374) while Margolis and Truesdale (1987) suggested that involving teachers in the process of developing individualized plans leads to increased commitment and motivation to implement the individualized plan.

Despite the apparent benefits of a multidisciplinary team approach to IPP development, research on individualized plans suggests that the process of developing the individualized plan is not always a collaborative one. For instance, studies of parental involvement and participation in planning meetings indicate that parents ask few questions during meetings and lack necessary information to make informed decisions (Van Reusen & Bos, 1994; Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Allen, 1983; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell & Lasky, 1988; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Kroth & Otten, 1983; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982). Similarly, studies of general educator involvement in developing individualized plans also suggest that regular education teachers are not actively involved in IPP development (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull & Curry, 1980; Pugach, 1982; Dudley-Marling, 1985). Finally, although there has been limited examination of student participation in IPP development, the few available studies indicate that many exceptional students are not involved in the IPP process (Lichsteinstein & Michaleides, 1993; Peters, 1990).

A second underlying premise of the individualized plan is the belief in individualized programming. In other words, each individualized plan is developed to address the specific needs of one individual learner and is not focused on the needs of a class or group of students (Alberta Education, 1995). However, the research on the content of individualized plans has raised questions about the degree to which individualized plans reflect specific learner needs. For instance, McBride and Forgnone (1985) examined the individualized plans of ninety students with learning disabilities,

behavioral disorders and mild mental retardation and reported that students with behaviour disorders received more behavioral objectives while students with learning disabilities and students with mild mental retardation received more academic objectives. These results are consistent with other studies examining the contents of individualized plans which have found a strong association between the type of objectives included on individualized plans and a student's categorical diagnosis (Nickles, Cronis, Justen & Smith, 1992; Epstein, Patton, Polloway & Foley, 1992; Lynch & Beare, 1990). Although Smith (1990) suggested that the research on individualized plans is "consistent with the assumption in special education that differentially diagnosed students have different characteristics and educational needs" (p.86), the use group characteristics, as opposed to individual learner characteristics, to develop individualized programs challenges the purpose of individualized programming since the IPP is intended to provide students with educational programs that meet their individual needs.

A third premise of the individualized plan centres on the notion that the individualized plan is an instructional guide for teachers. Lynch and Beare (1990) stated that "the annual goals and teaching objectives reveal the directions and emphases of instruction for each student with a handicap" (p.48). Similarly, Smith (1990) argued that there should be a clear connection between the individualized plan and classroom activities and described the individualized plan as the "blueprint" for teachers when planning instructional activities for students with special needs. However, research currently available on IEP use suggests that educators do not use individualized plans to design or implement instructional activities (Dudley-Marling, 1985; Pugach, 1982; Morgan & Rhode, 1983). For example, Margolis & Truesdale (1987) surveyed special education teachers regarding their use of individualized plans when planning instruction for their students with special needs and found that teachers did not make extensive use of IEPs to prepare daily instruction. The authors concluded that "the instructional utility of the IEP

is wanting" (p.156).

Along with its instructional functions, a fourth premise underlying individualized plans is the idea that the individualized plan is an administrative document which helps monitor and evaluate a student's educational progress and program. Stowitschek and Kelso (1989) described the individualized plan as "the focus point of due process, program monitoring, and educational services" (p.139) while Smith (1990) stated that the individualized plan "serves to guide, manage, and orchestrate children's special education programming" (p.85). Despite the administrative functions of individualized plans however, no research has examined how individualized plans are used to monitor and evaluate a student's educational program.

In summary, the individualized plan for students with special needs is founded on four underlying premises. First, the individualized plan is intended to be the result of a multidisciplinary team effort including professionals, parents and exceptional students. Second, the individualized plan is based on the concept of individualization. Each individualized plan is intended to address the specific needs of one exceptional learner and is not focused on the needs of a class or group of students. Third, the individualized plan is intended to help manage and evaluate the exceptional students's educational program. Fourth, the individualized plan is intended as a guide to help focus teachers on the needs of their exceptional students and to help plan appropriate instruction. Unfortunately, research on individualized plan suggests that the underlying premises of IPP development and use are not being met. Specifically, the research reveals that the process of development is dominated by special education teachers, that objectives for students are heavily influenced by a student's type of disability, and that the individualized plan is not used by teachers to plan or implement classroom activities for exceptional learners.

Researchers' attempts to explain their findings on individualized plans have consistently focused on teachers' attitudes and training regarding IPP development and

use. For instance, in regards to the lack of collaborative development of individualized plans, Gerber, Banbury, Miller & Griffin (1986) suggested that teachers' negative attitudes towards parental involvement account for the lack of parental involvement while Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull & Curry (1980) suggested that general education teachers are not actively involved in IPP development because they perceive individualized plans as special education documents which have little value in the general classroom setting. Similarly, attempts to explain the IPP's lack of instructional utility have also focused on educators' perceptions of the individualized plan. For instance, Margolis and Truesdale (1987) suggested that teachers perceive individualized plans as legal documents which must be developed in order to comply with legal requirements. In other words, teachers do not perceive the individualized plan as an instructional document. Other studies have suggested that insufficient training and preparation related to individualized plans account for the minimal use of individualized plans in school (Tymitz, 1980; Aksamit, 1990; Fender & Fiedler, 1990).

Although the explanations regarding the IPP's lack of instructional utility and collaborative development seem plausible based on available research, the current research on individualized plans is predicated on the assumption that educators, and in particular school-based educators, share the same understanding and beliefs regarding IPP development and use as the researchers. For instance, in criticizing the lack of parental involvement in developing individualized plans, researchers have assumed that educators have the same understanding of the role of parents and exceptional students as the policy makers and educational researchers. Similarly, in discussing the lack of IPP use in planning instructional activities, researchers have assumed that educators understand the functions or roles of the IPP to be that of an instructional guide. To date however, there has been no explicit examination of educators conceptual understanding of the purposes, development or use of individualized plans. Since IPPs are a requirement for all students

with special needs, examining educators understanding of individualized plans is an important first step in developing a comprehensive understanding of the nature and use individualized plans within the educational system.

### **Need for the Study**

Schools in the province of Alberta are required to develop and maintain Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) for students with special needs. Alberta Education guidelines emphasize a collaborative approach to IPP development which includes the participation of parents, and where appropriate students. Furthermore, Alberta Education expects that once developed, the IPP will be "implemented and monitored by school staff" (Alberta Education, 1997, p.2). Given the significant expectations of Alberta Education regarding Individualized Program Plans, there is a need to have a clear understanding of how individuals involved with IPPs understand the process of developing and using IPPs.

### **Purpose**

This research examined the perceptions of professionals within the field of education regarding the Individualized Program Plan. Specifically, one purpose of the research was to explore how provincial administrators, school board personnel, and school-based teachers and administrators thought IPPs should be developed and used within the educational system. A second purpose of the research was to identify factors which may hinder or promote IPP development and use in school. In order to achieve these purposes, the research was guided by the following questions:

1. What type of preparation do professionals within the field of education have related to IPPs?
- 2a). How do provincial administrators perceive the role of the IPP in the educational system?

- b). How do school board personnel perceive the role of the IPP in the educational system?
  - c). How do school-based educators perceive the role of the IPP in the educational system?
- 3a). How do provincial administrators think the IPP should be developed?
- b). How do school board personnel think the IPP should be developed?
  - c). How do school-based educators think the IPP should be developed?
- 4a). How do provincial administrators think an IPP should be used?
- b). How do school board personnel think an IPP should be used?
  - c). How do school-based educators think an IPP should be used?

## **Methodology**

A qualitative case study design was used since the intent of the research was to describe the perceptions of educational professionals at the provincial, school board, and school levels regarding the role, development and use of Individualized Program Plans. The investigation was conducted in three phases. After conducting a document review of provincial documents and policies related to Individualized Program Plans, administrators from the provincial Special Education Branch were interviewed about their understanding of the role of IPPs in the educational system, the process of developing IPPs and the use of IPPs in the educational system. In addition, during interviews, participants were asked to identify resources developed by the Special Education Branch related to Individualized Program Plans.

The second phase of the research involved school-based educators. One school in Alberta was selected to participate in the study. The school was selected based on the principal's willingness to participate in the study and because the school had students with Individualized Program Plans in attendance. Teachers and administrators at the school were interviewed about their understanding of the role, development and use of IPPs. A



survey examining how teachers use IPPs was developed and administered to all teachers in the school. In addition, the researcher attended meetings at the school, observed teachers and students during instructional activities, and engaged in informal conversations with staff while at the school.

The final phase of the research involved professionals at the school board level responsible for supporting schools and teachers in the development of IPPs. School board personnel were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the role, development and use of IPPs. In addition, during interviews, participants were asked to identify and, where possible provide copies of, the resources developed and used by school board personnel related to Individualized Program Plans.

### **Organization of Thesis**

Chapter One introduces the reader to the background of the study, explains the purpose and need for the research and outlines the format of the thesis.

Chapter Two reviews the literature related to Individualized Education Plans, focusing specifically on research related to IPP development and IPP use. The purpose of the literature review is to explore factors related to the development and implementation of individualized programs for students with special needs. In addition, Chapter Two discusses case study methodology, reviews the use of case study as a research design in special education, and explains the selection of case study methodology for this study on IPPs.

Chapter Three describes the methodology used to conduct the study. Procedures for identifying key participants as well as the procedures used for the collection and analysis of data are described.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study from the three different levels of the educational system: provincial, school board and school levels.

Chapter Five discusses the results of the research study. Implications of the research findings for educational research and practice are discussed.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review explores the literature related to individualized plans for students with special needs and discusses the use of case studies as a research design in special education. The first section presents a brief overview of the Individualized Program Plan in Alberta, focusing on the process of developing and using individualized plans. The intention of the first section is to provide a general understanding of the purposes of individualized program plans in the Alberta educational system. The second section of the review examines four basic premises which underlie the IPP in Alberta and reviews the empirical and theoretical support for each premise. The third section summarizes the research findings on individualized plans and discusses the methodological problems and limitations of the research. The chapter concludes with a review of case study methodology and discusses the use of case study designs in special education research.

#### **Individualized Program Plans in Alberta**

Alberta Education (1997a) defines an IPP as

A written plan prepared for each student with special needs who requires modifications to the regular school program. The IPP specifies goals and objectives, describes program modifications and outlines the special education services to be provided to meet the identified special needs (p.20).

By definition, students with special needs are students who require changes to the regular curriculum, or to instructional and evaluation strategies, materials, equipment or facilities (Alberta Education, 1995). Without changes or modifications to the regular school program, students with special needs are likely to struggle with their educational programs. Therefore the individualized plan is perceived as an essential component in

providing for the educational needs of exceptional students (Winzer, 1993).

While the specific contents of an individualized program plan will vary according to the student's particular needs, all IPPs in Alberta must include a statement of the assessed level of a student's educational performance, the student's strengths and areas of needs, long-term goals and short-term objectives, and the assessment procedures for short-term objectives. Long-term goals refer to annual goals which describe what the student can be expected to accomplish within a specified period of time, usually one school year, while short-term objectives are defined as the intermediate steps between the student's current level of performance and the projected long-term goal (Alberta Education, 1995). Therefore each long-term goal will have several short-term objectives associated with it. Short-term objectives are typically written to cover a six to eight week period and progression through the short-term objectives should result, in theory, in completion of the associated annual goal.

In addition to goals and objectives, each IPP must also contain a description of the special education and related services to be provided to the student, the dates on which the IPP will be reviewed as well as the results and recommendations which arise from the review, relevant medical information, a description of the classroom accommodations and modifications, and transition plans. A transition plan refers to a formal plan to assist students in moving from home to school, one grade or level of schooling to another, or from school to work (Alberta Education, 1997d).

Although the content of the IPP should reflect the needs and strengths of individual students, the purpose of Individualized Program Plans are the same for all students in Alberta regardless of specific disability or condition. According to Alberta Education (1995) the IPP is intended to ensure the provision of appropriate programming for students with special needs. An appropriate program is defined as

A program based on the results of ongoing assessment and evaluation, and which

includes an individualized program plan (IPP) with specific goals, objectives and recommendations for educational services that meet the student's needs (Alberta Education, 1997a, p.19).

In order to provide students with an appropriate program, there must be continuous "assessment of the congruency between the program and services provided, and the identified needs of the student" (Alberta Education, 1997a, p.19). Therefore, the IPP is intended to be reviewed periodically and changes and modifications to the IPP should be considered (Alberta Education, 1995). As a result of the requirement for reviews and updates, a student's individualized plan is not a legal contract nor is it intended to be a rigid document which cannot be modified during the school year. Instead, Alberta Education (1995) characterizes the IPP as a "working document" which provides a record of student progress.

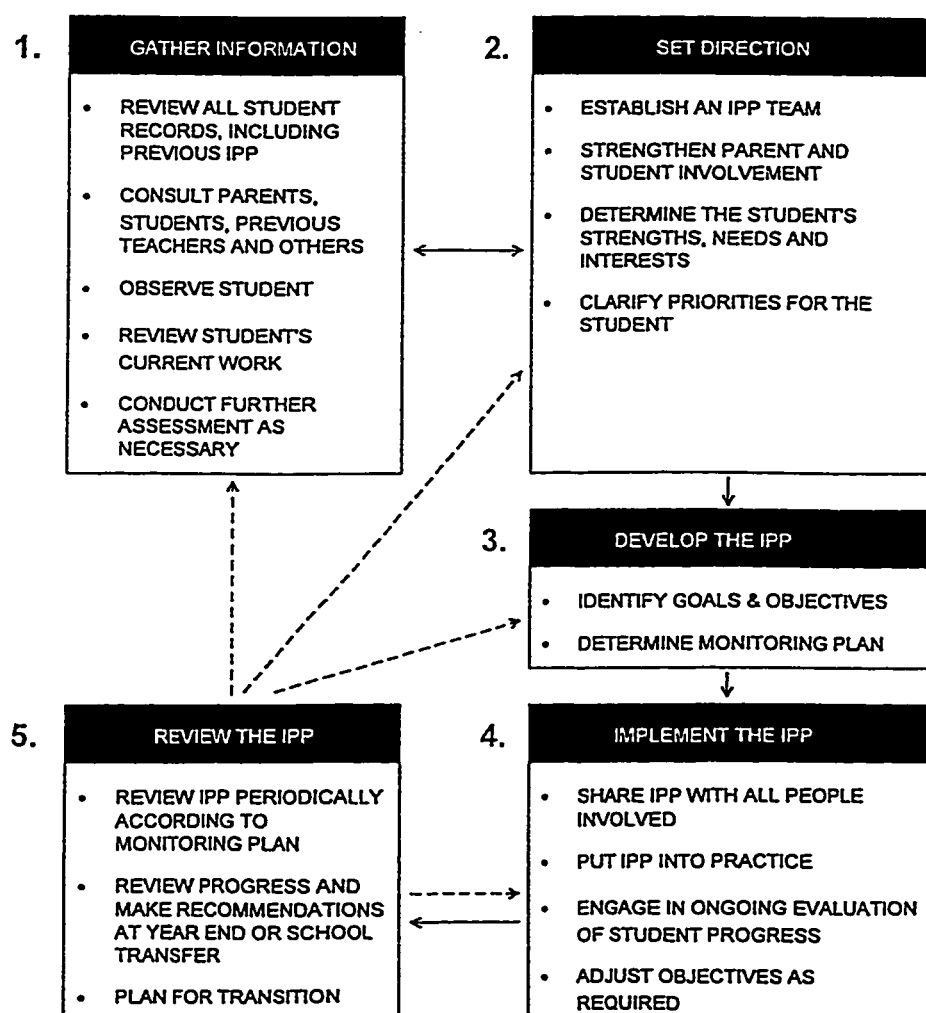
#### The IPP Process in Alberta

Figure 1. provides a graphic overview of the stages of the IPP process as conceived by Alberta Education. Although presented as a succession of stages, the IPP process is not always linear and the sequence of stages may be varied in order to meet the individual needs of the IPP team (Alberta Education, 1995). The dotted lines between some of the stages depicted in Figure 1 reflect the flexibility of the IPP process since it may be necessary to revisit stages in order to provide students with appropriate educational programs (Alberta Education, 1995).

As indicated in Figure 1, the IPP process in Alberta begins by gathering information about an individual student's strengths and areas of need. Information is gathered from student records, consultation with parents and professionals involved with the student, observations of the student, current work and assessments. Assessment

refers to formal psycho-educational procedures employed by qualified professionals as well as informal assessment procedures employed by general and special education teachers. Possible types of information to be gathered about a student include: academic achievement, attendance, school behaviour, communication skills, likes and dislikes, problem solving skills, social skills, learning styles, and self-concept (Alberta Education, 1995).

Figure 1. The IPP Process in Alberta



Source: Alberta Education, 1995

After collecting information about a student, the second step of the IPP process involves establishing the IPP team and determining the priorities and direction for the student's educational program. While the composition of the IPP team varies according to the educational needs of the student, general education teachers, parents, and students, whenever appropriate, are important members of the IPP team (Alberta Education, 1997a; 1995). According to Alberta Education (1995) guidelines, the IPP team meets on a regular basis to:

- develop an understanding of the student's strengths, interests and needs
- share information about the student's behaviour and learning across a variety of settings
- make decisions about educational goals and objectives
- reach consensus about the support required from related services personnel
- design educational methods and interventions
- make decisions about integrating therapeutic services into the classroom

The third stage of the IPP process involves the development of the IPP document. At this point in the IPP process, the priorities established for the student are translated into long-term goals and short term objectives. The development of formalized, written goals and objectives provides accountability, helps motivate students, facilitates team-parent communication, facilitates collaboration, and helps focus learning activities (Alberta Education, 1995). A second crucial part of developing the IPP document involves establishing a process and schedule to review the IPP on an on-going basis. The monitoring plan is then formally written onto the IPP document.

Following the development of the Individualized Program Plan, the next stage of the process involves the implementation of the IPP. Four steps have been identified with regards to implementing the IPP. First, the IPP should be shared with the IPP team. Sharing the IPP includes providing copies of the IPP to the team members, reviewing and clarifying the contents of the IPP, discussing parental involvement in supporting the

student's educational program and discussing the monitoring plan for the IPP. Second, teachers need to put the IPP into practice which involves, among other things, determining how long-term goals and short term objectives will be addressed daily, determining learning tasks for the student, and deciding on a method of monitoring goals and objectives within the classroom. Third, teachers need to engage in ongoing evaluation of student progress. Finally, teachers need to adjust objectives or strategies if the student is not progressing towards the objectives or if the student is achieving at a rate faster than anticipated (Alberta Education, 1995).

The final stage of the IPP process involves monitoring the IPP. As part of the process of developing the IPP document, a schedule for reviewing the IPP should have been developed and agreed upon by the IPP team. Therefore, monitoring the IPP consists of meeting at the appointed time to evaluate the student's progress toward the IPP goals and objectives. During the IPP review, changes to the IPP should be considered in particular when the student has achieved the goal or if progress toward an objective is limited. Finally, in order to ensure the continuity of programming for students with special needs, the Individualized Program Plan must be reviewed at the end of the school year in order to evaluate the student's progress and to make further recommendations regarding future special education needs for the student.

An examination of the IPP process developed by Alberta Education indicates that one of the purposes of the IPP is to act as an administrative document. By assuring program implementation, monitoring student progress, and evaluating a student's current educational program, the IPP is conceived as a tool to regulate, organize and evaluate a student's educational program. Furthermore, the IPP is intended to represent the cumulative efforts of a multidisciplinary team including professionals, parents, and whenever appropriate exceptional students themselves, which provides all individuals the opportunity for input into program development. A third purpose of the IPP is that it



focuses on the needs of one student, reflecting the student's particular strengths and needs as well as specific objectives to help the student succeed in the educational program.

Finally, although the IPP contains long-term goals and short-term instructional objectives, provincial guidelines differentiate between an IPP and a daily instructional plan.

Provincial guidelines state that the IPP is not a daily lesson plan (Alberta Education, 1995). Such a statement suggests that the IPP is considered to be a guide for teachers, a document which focuses teachers on the needs of their exceptional students and identifies for teachers specific goals to be worked on for each exceptional child. Instructional methods and activities, which would be required in an instructional plan, are left to the discretion of teachers.

In conclusion, the Individualized Program Plan, as outlined in provincial guidelines and documents, has four fundamental premises. The IPP is intended it is to reflect a collaborative process of development, is focused on the individual needs of one student, and has both administrative and instructional functions.

### **Premises of the Individualized Program Plan**

#### **Premise I: Collaborative Development**

One of the basics premises of the IPP process in Alberta is the belief that the IPP document should be a collaborative effort since

the educational growth of a student is best accomplished through the mutual efforts of, and close communication among, the student, the family, the school, the community and other professionals involved with the student (Alberta Education, 1995, p.1)

Turnbull, Strickland and Brantley (1982) argued that the involvement of general classroom teachers in developing individualized plans increases the likelihood of providing exceptional students with an appropriate educational program since the classroom teachers

can provide information regarding current performance and share their perspective on student strengths and weaknesses. In turn general classroom teachers can gain valuable knowledge about students disabilities, their characteristics, and their limitations.

Similarly, Bauwens and Korinek (1993) argued that collaboration between general and special education teachers

can result in enhanced communication and understanding of student strengths and needs, a more relevant document for instruction, increased likelihood of skill generalization, and an increased commitment to collegial efforts to serve students with learning and behavioral problems in mainstream settings (p.303).

Despite the benefits of including general education teachers in the development of individualized plans, research indicates that general education teachers have only a minor role in developing individualized plans. For instance, Pugach (1982) surveyed 33 regular education teachers regarding their involvement in generating individualized plans for their exceptional students. Pugach (1982) reported that only 52% of the general education teachers surveyed had attended the most recent meeting concerning a student's individualized plan. Pugach also reported that the classroom teachers' involvement in the development process involved conferring with special educators and providing information regarding a student's current level of performance. In other words, general classroom teachers in Pugach's study were not involved in developing the specific goals and objectives written on individualized plans.

The limited involvement of general education teachers has been reported in other studies as well. For instance, Dudley-Marling's (1985) survey of special educators' perceptions of individualized plans found that lack of involvement of general classroom teachers was cited as a major problem with the process of developing individualized plans. Similarly, Nevin, McCann and Semmel (1983) surveyed classroom teachers regarding their contribution to the preparation of individualized plans. The authors

reported that only 34% of teachers attended planning meetings for their students with special needs while only 19% of teachers reported attending review meetings. Ysseldyke, Algozzine and Allen (1982) observed the interaction of general education teachers at planning meetings by recording the number of 10-second intervals in which the generalists spoke during the meeting. The authors reported that general education teachers only participated about 27 percent of the time.

In addition to regular classroom teachers, the involvement of parents in developing individualized plans has also been investigated. Alberta Education guidelines describe parents as integral members of the IPP process since they provide unique perspectives on their child. Furthermore, Alberta Education states that "open communication and cooperation between home and school increases the opportunities for students with special needs to experience success" (1995, p.6). However, empirical studies of parental involvement in developing individualized plans indicate that parents are not actively involved in developing their child's educational program. For instance, Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull and Curry (1980) observed 14 IEP meetings and reported that parents were the primary recipients of information; however parents rarely asked questions or made suggestions. Interestingly, Goldstein and her colleagues had intended to observe a total of 21 conferences but seven of the scheduled meetings were cancelled by parents. In these seven instances, Goldstein et.al. (1980) reported that the individualized plan was sent home for parents to sign, an action which suggests a disregard for parental involvement in the planning and monitoring of their children's individual education plan.

Other studies of parental involvement have also shown a lack of parental participation in planning and developing individualized plans. Vaughn, Bos, Harrell and Lasky (1988) observed 26 IEP conferences and then interviewed parents immediately after the meetings. Although all meetings were attended by at least one parent, the

authors reported that parents asked few questions, lacked necessary information to make informed decisions, and had an incomplete understanding of the technical terms (ie.LD) used during the meetings. Vaughn et.al (1988) concluded that IEP meetings involved decision telling rather than decision making. These findings are consistent with previous research which indicated that parents are not active participants in developing their child's individualized plan (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Kroth & Otten, 1983; McKinney & Hocutt, 1982).

Examinations of teachers' perceptions of parental contributions in developing and monitoring individualized plans reveal that teachers, and in particular special education teachers, are divided concerning the purpose and value of parent participation. For instance, Gerber, Banbury, Miller and Griffin (1986) surveyed 145 special education teachers and reported that only half of special educators surveyed felt parental participation in developing individualized plans had merit. Over two-thirds (71%) of teachers believed that parents should have the option of waiving the requirement of participation while 44.3% of the teachers surveyed perceived IEP meetings as a mere formality. Gilliam and Coleman (1981) suggested that teachers' attitudes toward parental involvement reflect a belief that parents neither have the proper information nor expertise to contribute to educational planning. Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman and Maxwell (1978) stated that "teachers do not feel that it is appropriate for parents to have a role in developing the student's plan, judging program alternatives, or making final decisions" (p.533).

Several studies however have suggested that parents themselves do not want to assume an active role in developing their child's individualized plan. Goldstein et al (1980) reported that many parents preferred the role of information-giver as opposed to active participant. These results are similar to those reported by Lusthaus, Lausthaus and Gibbs (1981) and Nadler and Shore (1980) who also found that parents preferred to be passive

participants in the development of their children's educational programs. Goldstein et al. (1980) believe that lack of knowledge regarding the purpose and objectives of the IEP meeting limits parental involvement. However, Turnbull suggested that limited parental involvement could be the result of teachers' limited expectations concerning parental roles and hence is a self-fulfilling prophesy (cited in Gerber, Banbury, Miller & Griffin, 1986).

In addition to parent and general educator participation in planning individualized plans, student involvement in developing their individualized plans has also been examined. Alberta Education encourages student involvement in the IPP process and suggests that students, where appropriate given their abilities and level of development, participate in the IPP process by sharing their perceptions of their own learning strengths, needs and interests (Alberta Education, 1995). Van Reusen and Bos (1994) argued that the involvement of exceptional students in the development of their individualized plans is both empowering and motivating since involvement provides opportunities for students to make decisions regarding their futures. Similarly, Peters (1990) stated that "when they [exceptional students] are empowered as active team members in all aspects of the IEP process, students have an opportunity to increase their independence, self-advocacy skills, and self-esteem" (p.32). In addition, adolescent students may be less resistant to educational programs that they have helped develop (Peters, 1990).

Although only a limited number of studies have examined student participation in generating individualized plans, the research available indicates that most students are not involved in planning their individualized plan. For example, using case studies to examine the transition of four students with mental retardation from high school to post-secondary environments, Lichtenstein and Michaelides (1993) reported that three of the four adolescents did not attend planning or review meetings. In an examination of students and parents' knowledge concerning the development of individualized plans, Gillespie (1981) reported that 90% of exceptional students and 75% of parents were unaware of provisions

for student participation in developing and monitoring individualized plans (cited in Peters, 1990).

When viewed collectively, the research on individualized plans suggests that the individualized plan is a document developed largely by special educators. General education teachers' involvement is limited to describing current educational performance and classroom behaviours. Furthermore, parental participation is limited to the role of information receiver while student involvement in planning individualized plans is negligible. However, these research findings on special educator dominance of the development process appear to challenge the premise of collaborative development which underlies the IPP process in Alberta. By encouraging the participation of general education teachers, parents, and exceptional learners in planning and monitoring individualized plans, the Alberta government intended to create a process whereby the individuals closest to, and most involved with, exceptional students discuss, plan and coordinate the educational programs of exceptional learners.

### Premise II: Individualized Programming

A second premise underlying individualized plans is the concept of individualization. Individualized plans are intended to represent each exceptional student's right to a specially designed program and are based on the belief that the student drives the educational program rather than the program driving the student (Epstein, Patton, Polloway & Foley, 1992). "Individualized" therefore means that the focus of the written program is on the educational needs of one student, and not a class or group of students (Fiscus & Mandel, 1983; Schaffer, 1984). Furthermore, in assessing a child's current level of educational performance Alberta Education (1995) specifies that in addition to the assessment of academic achievement, social, behavioral, vocational and life skills may be assessed. The results of the comprehensive assessment form the basis of the IPP, a

document which should reflect the unique needs of the student in any or all of the identified skill areas (Nickles, Cronis, Justen & Smith, 1992).

Research on the individualized plans of students with mild and moderate disabilities however suggests that individualized plans do not reflect comprehensive programming but rather are focused predominantly on academic objectives. For instance, in one of the earliest published studies on the type of objectives included on individualized plans, Anderson, Barner and Larson (1978) reported that 75% of all objectives written for students with learning disabilities, mild mental retardation, and behavioral disorders concerned academic areas such as reading, language arts and mathematics. Social, emotional and behavioral objectives comprised only 10% of the total number of objectives written. In a similar study Nickles, Cronis, Justen and Smith (1992) examined the individualized plans for 150 students with behaviour disorders, learning disabilities, and mild mental retardation and determined that 54% of all objectives focused on academic skills. Similar results were reported by Krom and Prater (1993) who examined the individualized plans of students with mild mental retardation and reported that 86.6% of objectives were academic.

In addition, studies of the type of objectives written for exceptional students suggest an association between a student's type of disability and the type of objectives included on individualized plans. Specifically, studies have shown that academic objectives appear most often for students with learning disabilities and students with mental retardation while objectives for students with behaviour disorders emphasize both behavioral concerns. For instance, Lynch and Beare (1990) reported that 31% of objectives on individualized plans for students with behavioral problems were academic in nature while 57% of the objectives focused on behaviour management issues and 4% of the objectives addressed social skills. However, for students classified with mild mental retardation, Lynch and Beare (1990) found that 83% of the objectives were academic, 2%

of the objectives focused on behaviour management and 1% of objectives addressed social skills.

Turning to the type of objectives written for students with behaviour disorders, Nickles, Cronis Justen and Smith (1992) examined the individualized plans of fifty students with behavioral problems and found that 54% of objectives were academic while 26% of objectives focused on behavioural objectives. However, Nickles et.al's (1992) reported emphasis on academic objectives for students with behaviour disorders is not consistent with findings from other studies. For instance, Epstein, Patton, Polloway and Foley (1992) examined the individualized plans of 107 junior high school students with behaviour disorders and reported that the majority of objectives focused on behavioural issues. Studies by Pray, Hall and Markley (1992) and Smith (1990) have also reported that the majority of objectives for students with behaviour problems focused on behaviour management.

In contrast to the academic and behavioral objectives found on individualized plans, studies indicate that few social and vocational objectives are included for students with special needs. Pray, Hall and Markley (1992) reported that only 35% of a sample of 469 individualized plans had social skills objectives while Lynch and Beare (1990) reported that less than 5% of objectives for students with behaviour disorders and mental retardation focused on social or interpersonal skills. Epstein, Patton, Palloway and Foley's study (1992) of individualized plans for junior high school students revealed that only 1.9% of all the plans included vocational goals. These results are consistent with studies published in the 1970's and 1980's which found that academic objectives dominated individualized plans while social, vocational and life skills were consistently under represented (Anderson, Barner & Larson, 1978; Epstein, Polloway, Patton & Foley, 1989; McBride & Forgnone, 1985; McCormick & Fisher, 1983; Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1989; Weisenfeld, 1986).



When viewed collectively, the research findings on the type of objectives included on individualized plans suggest that the individual plan is an academic document rather than a comprehensive program which addresses a diverse range of student needs. Furthermore, the research suggests that objectives for students are influenced by a student's type of disability. The predominance of academic objectives and the apparent tendency to develop programs based on students' types of disabilities however challenge the concept of individualized planning as presented in provincial special education guidelines. First, provincial guidelines encourage the examination of social, behavioral, vocational and life skills as part of the assessment process. In addition, the requirement that transition plans be included in the IPP suggests that the IPP is designed to address more than academic concerns. Second, while students with the same disability may have some similar characteristics and needs, each student will present with a variety of strengths, interests, and needs. Therefore a students' categorical label should not be interpreted to mean that all students with the same disability require the same type of interventions or have the same areas of need. Dowdy and Smith (1991) have suggested that the high levels of unemployment, underemployment and social adjustment difficulties faced by former special education students reflects the danger of providing an educational program which is predetermined according to a student's exceptionality rather than one which is sensitive to the individual's needs and abilities. Therefore, if individualized plans are heavily influenced by categorical labels rather than individual needs, such a process challenges the intent of individualizing programs for students with special needs and raises concerns about the ability of the individualized plan to fulfil its mandate of ensuring the provision of an appropriate educational program to students with special needs.

### Premise III: Monitoring and Evaluation

A third premise of the IPP in Alberta is the notion that the IPP has administrative

functions in relation to a student's educational program. Specifically, the IPP is intended to be reviewed on an ongoing basis throughout the year and the results of the reviews are used to assess, and if necessary, revise student programs and placements (Alberta Education, 1997a). Therefore, the IPP is a critical tool in ensuring the provision of appropriate programming for students with special needs. Despite the importance of individualized plans for ensuring that exceptional students receive appropriate educational programs, the management functions of individualized plans have received very little attention in the literature. To date, no research has examined how individualized plans are used to monitor or evaluate a student's program. The few existing empirical studies of the type of information included on individualized plans indicate that many individualized plans are incomplete and fail to include required information. For instance, Weisenfeld (1986) conducted a content-analysis of 41 individualized plans of students with moderate and severe mental retardation and reported that 19.5% of the individualized plans failed to indicate who had participated in the development of the individualized plan while 36.5% of the individualized plans did not have the signature of parents or guardians. Smith's (1990) content-analysis of the individualized plans of 120 students with behaviour disorders and learning disabilities indicated that the individualized plans for students with behavioral disorders frequently failed to indicate the start date for services and to specify the expected duration of services. Smith (1990) concluded that the high incidence of procedural faults impugns the role of the individualized plan as a management tool of special education programs.

#### Premise IV: Instructional Guide

Another premise which underlies the IPP in Alberta is the concept of the individualized plan as a guide which facilitates instructional planning. By presenting teachers with formalized goals and objectives, the IPP is intended to have an association

with instructional activities. Since provincial education guidelines specify that the IPP is not a daily lesson plan, the inclusion of goals and objectives on individualized plans suggests that the IPP is intended to focus teachers attention on the identified needs of students but also allows teachers to design the specific instruction required to achieve the goals and objectives.

While provincial guidelines present the IPP as an instructional guide, the literature on individualized plans is ambiguous regarding the relationship between individualized plans and classroom activities. One interpretation of the relationship between individualized plans and classroom instruction, and one which mirrors Alberta Education's conception of individualized plans, is the view that the individualized plan is an instructional guide for teachers. For instance, Smith, Slattery, and Knopp (1993) described the individualized plan as a "blueprint from which to generate a specific instructional program for a student" (p.5) while Fiscus and Mandell (1983) described it as "the basis for day-to-day lesson planning" (p.22). Ortiz and Wilkinson (1989) stated that the individualized plan "details instructional priorities for special education and related services, recommends approaches, strategies, and materials" (p.555) while Hendrick-Keefe (1992) stated that an individualized plan should provide information to guide daily instruction. The common element in these descriptions centres on the notion that the individualized plan provides guidance and direction to teachers in planning instructional activities for specific students. In other words, the individualized plan is a source of information for teachers regarding instruction and evaluation for specific exceptional students; it is not the actual instruction plan.

A second interpretation of the role of individualized plans is that the individualized plan represents the curriculum for special needs students. Sands, Adams and Stout (1995) make a distinction between curriculum and instruction by stating that "curriculum is the *what* and instruction is the *how* in the development and design of special education

programs" (p.69). Therefore individuals who subscribe to the view that the IEP is the exceptional student's curriculum believe that the content of a student's program are defined exclusively by the IEP. For example, Lieberman (1985) argued that the general education curriculum is too restrictive and cannot be adapted to the needs of exceptional students. As a result Lieberman suggested that every exceptional student should have a unique curriculum developed to meet their educational needs. Thus the individualized plan is the basis from which the exceptional student's curriculum will be developed (Sands, Adams & Stout, 1995). In a recent study of 341 elementary and secondary special education teachers, Sands, Adams and Stout (1995) reported that over half of the teachers surveyed believed that the individualized plan, and not the general education curriculum, constituted a student's curriculum.

Similar evidence that individualized plans represent the curriculum for students with special needs can be found in the study by Krom and Prater (1993), who examined the IEPs of 21 intermediate aged students with mild mental retardation and then asked their teachers to complete self-reports of subjects and content areas taught. The authors observed that most students received instruction in areas not specified on their IEPs. For example, while six students had formalized IEP goals related to vocational skills, 18 students were being taught vocational skills. Krom and Prater (1993) argued that the individualized plan should be the essential component of instructional design and delivery and present the discrepancy between IEP objectives and the contents of classroom instruction as an impediment to the successful education of students with mild mental retardation. Therefore, Krom and Prater's (1993) study is predicated on the assumption that teachers must teach only what is specified on a student's IEP. In other words, the content of classroom instruction for students with special needs is defined solely by their individualized plan.

A third interpretation of the relationship between individualized plans and

classroom activities is that the individualized plan is a daily instructional plan. For instance, Dudley-Marling (1985) described the individualized plan as "something that influences the instruction of handicapped children on a daily basis" (p.66) while Stowitschek and Kelso (1989) described the individualized plan as "a directive document" and argued that the individualized plan was designed to be the basis of instructional delivery. In a study of the association between objectives written on individualized plans and active classroom instruction, Lynch and Beare (1990) analyzed the individualized plans of 48 students with mild mental retardation and behaviour disorders and then observed the students in their classrooms. The authors reported that "there was little relationship between the content of the IEP and the activities of the instructional day" (p.53). However, Lynch and Beare observed students for only one day of classroom instruction, which suggests that their understanding of the individualized plan is as an instructional document to be used on a daily basis.

Although there are differing perspectives on the relationship between individualized plans and actual classroom practices, all three perspectives imply that the individualized plan should have some influence on classroom activities. However, research on teachers' use of individualized plans indicates that general education teachers do not use individualized plans to design or implement instructional activities. For instance, Pugach (1982) used questionnaires and interviews to examine the experiences of thirty-three general education teachers and found that approximately half the teachers did not consult a student's individualized plan before generating new instructional objectives. Pugach (1982) also reported that 34% of teachers surveyed believed that the individualized plans were useful for special educators while only 15% of regular classroom teachers surveyed believed that an individualized plan for a student with special needs helped improve their instruction. Similar findings were reported by Nevin, McCann and Semmel (1983) who found that regular classroom teachers used individualized plans

very infrequently -- usually only once or twice a year. Furthermore, 20% of teachers surveyed by Nevin, McCann and Semmel expressed the opinion that individualized plans were not useful for planning and implementing instructional activities.

The individualized plan's lack of instructional utility has also been reported in studies of special educators' experiences with individualized plans. For instance, Margolis and Truesdall (1989) reported results of a five item questionnaire completed by 33 special education teachers. Seventy-two percent of special education teachers surveyed considered the individualized plan to be primarily a legal requirement while only three percent of special education teachers considered individualized plans to be important guides for planning daily instruction. The teachers in Margolis and Truesdall's study (1989) cited their minimal or marginalized role in IEP development, excessive time demands associated with developing individualized plans, and the inclusion of inappropriate objectives as the major complaint against individualized plans. Similar results were also reported by Dudley-Marling (1985), who surveyed 150 teachers of students with emotional problems and learning disabilities and reported that the majority of teachers did not consider individualized plans to be useful in planning day-to-day instructions.

In a longitudinal study of special educators' perceptions of individualized plans, Morgan (1981) and Morgan and Rhode (1983) surveyed 197 special education teachers in 1978 and using the same questionnaire surveyed 275 special education teachers in 1980. Results from both sets of surveys revealed little change in special educators' attitudes toward individualized plans between 1978 and 1980. In both studies teachers were concerned with the excessive time demands associated with the development of individualized plans and indicated that they received too little support from other educators in the development and implementation of individualized plans. Teachers in Morgan and Rhode's study (1983) also reported that they could teach just as effectively

without individualized plans. In reviewing the 1978 and 1980 studies, Morgan and Rhode (1983) concluded that special education teachers "do not perceive a clear relationship between the IEP as a written document and the IEP as a determinant of what happens on a daily basis in the classroom" (p.66).

### Summary of Findings on the Premises of IPPs

In summary, several fundamental problems emerge from a review of the literature on individualized plans. The first problem is the absence of a clear and precise understanding of the nature and functions of individualized plans. While some educators perceive individualized plans as a guide for teachers in planning the educational classroom activities for their students with special needs, other educators perceive individualized plans as the actual instructional plans for classroom activities. Another perception of the individualized plan is as the curriculum for students with special needs. The lack of consensus regarding the basic nature of individualized plans makes it difficult to evaluate the usefulness of the IPP document. A second problem associated with individualized plans is the absence of information regarding the administrative functions and uses of individualized plans. The literature also indicates that the individualized plan is not developed collaboratively but rather is a document which is created by special education teachers. Parents and students have minimal involvement in the process of generating individualized plans. Finally, the research on individualized plans suggests that objectives written for students with special needs are heavily influenced by a student's type of disability .

### Methodological Issues with Regards to Research on IPPs

Although the research on individualized plans for students with special needs raises questions about the perception, development and use of individualized plans, there are

several methodological issues regarding the research on individualized plans which result from a review of the literature. First, there is a striking paucity of research on the development and use of individualized plans in Canada. While the concept of individualized plans for exceptional students has been adopted by Canadian educators (Canadian Teachers' Association, 1981) and all Canadian provinces require some form of individualized plan for their exceptional students (Winzer, 1993), it is unclear how Canadian educators perceive, develop and use individualized plans.

A second problem with the research on individualized plans is simply the age of much of the research. While there have been some studies published within the last five years (Krom & Prater, 1993; Lichtenstein & Michaelides, 1993; McCrea, 1993; Sands & Adams, 1995; Van Reusen & Bos, 1994), the majority of studies were published in the 1980's. Particularly distressing is the fact that the most recent study on the perceptions of individualized plans among regular classroom teachers was published in 1983. Since the individualized plans were only introduced in 1975, most of the research related to individualized plans was conducted when the concept of IPPs was still a relatively new addition to special education. Therefore, there is a critical need to examine the perceptions, development and use of individualized plans in the late 1990's in order to understand the role individualized plans currently play in special education.

A third problem with the studies on individualized plans is the absence of any empirical work on educators' understanding of the role of IPPs. A substantial portion of the research is based on teachers' self-reports of their experiences developing and using individualized plans. While a variety of data collection techniques have been used in the study of individualized plans, for instance questionnaires (Morgan, 1981; Morgan & Rhode, 1983; Dudley-Marling, 1985), interviews (Pugach, 1982), questionnaires and interviews (Margolis & Truesdall, 1989), and comprehensive written responses and interviews (Nevin, McCann & Semmel, 1983), researchers have assumed that teachers'



attitudes toward individualized plans are representative of their understanding of the rationale and principles which underlie individualized education plans. To date no study asked teachers explicitly examined educators' understanding of individualized plans or the process of developing and using the document. In other words, while researchers have examined teachers' subjective reactions to individualized plans they have failed to examine teachers' conceptual knowledge of individualized plans.

Understanding teachers' conceptual knowledge of individualized plans is important given the expectations regarding teacher involvement in developing and implementing individualized plans. Although insufficient teacher training and preparation has been cited as a reason for the dominance of academic objectives on individualized plans, no researcher seems to have considered the possibility that the academic nature of the individualized plans reflects teachers' understanding of the purpose of the IPP.

Another problem with research on individualized plans is that the characteristics of teachers, their educational backgrounds, or their familiarity with individualized plans is not discussed in most of the research studies. Understanding the backgrounds and experiences of teachers involved with IPPs is particularly important since many researchers have suggested that the problems with individualized plans reflect poor teacher training and preparation (Epstein, Patton, Polloway & Foley, 1992; Howell, 1985; Pray, Hall & Markley, 1992; Smith, 1990).

A final problem with research on individualized plans IEPs is the absence of research on the management and evaluative functions of IPPs. As a management and evaluation document, the IPP is intended to ensure the delivery of appropriate programs to exceptional students and help judge the success of the program and student progress. However, to date there have been no studies examining how individualized plans are used to manage or evaluate programs. Furthermore, only one study (Turnbull, Strickland & Brantley, 1982) since 1975 has examined the involvement of non-teaching professionals

in the development and use of individualized plans. Therefore, until the research agenda expands to include examinations of all the functions associated with individualized plans, as well as the various professionals involved with IPPs, a comprehensive understanding of the role of individualized plans cannot be achieved.

Therefore, given the problems related to research on individualized plans identified in the literature, this study focused on exploring educators' conceptual understanding of individualized plans, with particular emphasis on educators' understanding of the purpose, development and use of IPPs. A second purpose of the research was to identify potential barriers to the effective development and use of IPPs within the school system. In order to achieve these goals, the research utilized a qualitative case study design.

### Characteristics of Qualitative Research

In order to begin to examine educators' conceptual understanding of individualized program plans, a suitable research strategy needs to be identified. Research, by definition, is the "systematic investigation to increase knowledge and/or understanding" (Page & Thomas, 1977, p.290). Inherent in any research effort is a set of basic beliefs and assumptions, commonly referred to as the research paradigm, about the nature of research and of reality. Two key research paradigms are quantitative and qualitative research. Each paradigm presents a distinct view of the world and of the purposes of research. Table 1 contains a summary of the major differences between qualitative and quantitative research.

While quantitative research is based on the assumption that there is a single, objective reality which can be observed and measured, qualitative research assumes that reality is not an objective phenomenon but rather is a function of personal interaction and perception. Thus while the purposes of research in the quantitative paradigm are to examine causal relationships and to predict similar events in the future (Merriam &

Simpson, 1995), the purposes of qualitative research are "to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives, to delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and to describe how people interpret what they experience" (Merriam & Simpson, 1995, p.98).

Table 1  
Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Characteristic	Qualitative Research	Quantitative Research
Goal of Research	understanding, description, discovery, hypothesis generating	prediction, control, description, conformation, hypothesis testing
Setting	natural, familiar	unfamiliar, artificial
Sample	small, non-random, theoretical	large, random, representative
Data Collection	researcher as primary instrument	inanimate instruments as primary instruments
Mode of Analysis	inductive (by research)	deductive (by statistical method)
Findings	comprehensive, holistic, descriptive, presented using words and pictures	precise, narrow, reductionist, presented using numerical data

Source: Merriam and Simpson, 1995

Furthermore, the environment or context of a phenomenon under study is critical to the qualitative framework. While the quantitative tradition adheres to the notion that reality is both objective and quantifiable, and therefore can be measured independently from its environment, the qualitative tradition maintains that the context in which a phenomenon occurs is critical to understanding the phenomenon itself. When an event is

removed from its social context in which it appears, or the context is ignored, the meaning of the phenomenon or event can become distorted (Neuman, 1995).

### Critical Features and Advantages of Case Study Designs

Although there are several types of qualitative designs, one type of qualitative research design is the case study. Yin (1994) and Merriam (1988) identify three key features of case study methodology which differentiates it from other research methods. First, both authors state that the intention of case study research is description, exploration and explanation, rather than prediction or enumeration of events. In other words, case study designs are not concerned with numerical frequencies or with measuring the outcome or effects of particular actions or events (Merriam & Simpson, 1995), but rather attempt to answer "how" and "why" type research questions. Second, since case study designs are not concerned with effects or outcomes, there is little or no active attempt to control or manipulate variables in the study (Merriam, 1988). Yin (1994) contends that case studies are particularly well suited to situations in which the researcher has limited control over behavioral events. Finally, the third distinguishing feature of the case study, according to Yin (1994) and Merriam (1988), is its focus on contemporary events. Case studies are concerned with current events and phenomena, a characteristic that is useful in differentiating the case study from the historical study since both methodologies focus on description, exploration, and explanation, and often employ similar data collection techniques (Yin, 1994).

One of the clear advantages in using a case study design is the ability to examine the context in which interactions or behaviours occur. As Neuman (1994) cautioned, removing or ignoring the context in which an event, social action, or response to a question occurs can significantly distort the meaning of that event or response. Furthermore, since case studies provide a detailed account of a phenomenon within its

context, qualitative studies have a high degree of validity. "An in-depth description showing the complexities of variables and interactions will be so embedded with data derived from the setting that it cannot help but be valid" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p.145). Another strength of case study research is the flexibility of the design and its applicability to a wide variety of situations. Indeed, case studies lends themselves easily to research questions where the knowledge base is not fully developed. In other words, case study designs can be used effectively even when there is a lack of research or theoretical work from which to develop hypotheses or theories.

Another strength of case study research is its use of multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994; Merriam & Simpson, 1995). The process of using more than one source of data is known as triangulation and Neuman (1994) observed that the basic concept underlying triangulation is the idea that measurement improves when a variety of indicators are used. As the diversity of data sources increases, the validity of the research also increases since obtaining "measurements from highly diverse methods implies greater validity than if a single or similar methods had been used" (Neuman, 1994, p. 141).

In summary, a review of the characteristics of case study designs indicates that the case study is an appropriate research strategy to use to explore educators' understanding of Individualized Program Plans. First, the purpose of this study is to present a comprehensive description of educators' perceptions of IPPs. Second, although the IPP is a discrete entity, educators' understanding of the document, its functions and its uses, cannot be separated easily from the larger educational environment in which educators function. Finally, the review of the literature on individualized plan has revealed a scarcity of research on individualized plans, and in particular research from a Canadian perspective. Therefore, the case study design is a suitable strategy to begin exploring educators' understanding of individualized plans for students with special needs since the purpose of the research is to describe a contemporary phenomenon, embedded within a

real-life context, which has not been well researched or conceptualized.

### The Use of Case Studies in Special Education Research

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the use of the case study designs in special education research, a content-analysis of case studies published between 1990 and 1997 was conducted. Eleven general and special education journals, selected on the basis of their availability at the University of Calgary, were examined and a total of 2165 articles were identified. Articles were classified into one of two categories: research article or non-data based article. Research articles included any empirical study regardless of methodology used while articles which did not report results from a research project or study were classified as non-data based articles. For the purpose of the content-analysis, editorials, rejoinders, introductions to special topics and issues, reviews of psychological test and book reviews were not considered for inclusion. A list of the journals examined, the number of articles per journal, and the number of case studies published in each journal is presented in Table 2.

As indicated in Table 2, a total of 1128 research articles were published between 1990 and 1997. Of the research articles published, there were a total of nineteen case studies published between 1990 and 1997. When compared to the total number of research studies, case studies represented 2% of the total research studies published between 1990 and 1997. The limited number of case studies published between 1990 and 1997 are consistent with similar patterns reported by Calder, Justen and Smith (1990) who investigated the trend in the number and types of research articles published in special education journals in 1968, 1977 and 1986. Although the authors did not have a distinct category for case study designs, they reported that a combination of case studies, field studies and ethnographic studies, accounted for only 6% of published research articles published in 1968, 1977 and 1986. Thus the limited use of case study designs, originally identified by Calder, Justen and Smith (1990), appears to have continued in the 1990's.

Table 2

## Breakdown of Article Type Per Journal

<b>Journal</b>	<b>Number of Articles</b>	<b>Non-Data Based Articles</b>	<b>Research Studies</b>	<b>Case Studies</b>
Canadian Journal of School Psychology	111	53	58	0
Educational Psychologist	166	153	13	0
Educational Researcher	234	220	14	1
Exceptional Children	292	85	208	4
Exceptionality Education Canada	123	83	40	2
Journal of Research and Development in Education	219	32	187	1
Journal of School Psychology	187	45	142	2
Journal of Special Education	215	78	138	5
Learning Disability Quarterly	170	49	121	2
Remedial and Special Education	268	141	126	1
Teacher Education and Special Education	180	99	81	1

<b>TOTALS</b>	2165	1038	1128	19
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Although a total of nineteen studies were identified as case studies by their

authors, a review of the characteristics of each study indicated that in fact eight of the studies, representing 40% of the total number of studies analyzed, did not meet the criteria for case study research. Two articles were discussion papers and not representative of any research activity (Affleck & Lowenbraun, 1995; Schiff-Myers, Djukic, McGovern-Lawler & Perez, 1993) while the remaining six studies were designed to measure the effect of a treatment or intervention (Mastropieri, Scruggs & Rwey-Lin, 1997; Galloway & Sheridan, 1994; Gaughan, 1994; Duax, 1992; Jenkins & Leichester, 1992; Beattie, 1991). Case study designs, by definition, are concerned with understanding and elaborating process as well as describing and explaining; therefore the purposes of the six misidentified studies were clearly not in keeping with the intent of case study methods. In addition, five of the misidentified studies also violated a second criteria of case study research. Studies by Mastropieri, Scruggs and Rwey-Lin (1997), Gaughan (1995), Galloway and Sheridan (1994), Jenkins and Leichester (1992), and Beattie (1991) all had direct researcher manipulation and control over variables, a characteristic which is a fundamental contradiction of the intent and definition of case study research (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1988).

The results of the analysis of the eleven case studies that did fulfil the criteria of case study research, specifically the studies had research questions which matched the intent of case study research, have little or no researcher control over behavioural events, and focus on contemporary events and phenomenon, are summarized in Table 3. An examination of the characteristics of these eleven studies indicates several problems with the use of case studies in the special education literature. First, while all the case studies with the exception of Smith's (1992) study, used two or more sources of data, all of the studies, without exception, lacked any discussion or explanation for their selection of data sources. For instance, while documents were used in ten of the eleven studies, none of the ten studies explained why documents were selected as data sources for the studies. Similarly, while



several studies elaborated the process used to select participants for interviews (Zigmond, 1991; Lichtenstein, 1993; Bartleheim & Evans, 1993), no study discussed its rationale for conducting interviews. In other words the studies did not demonstrate how the various data sources contributed to the case study.

In addition to the paucity of explanations regarding data source selection, most of the studies also failed to describe the procedures used to gather their data. For instance, documents were used in nine studies; however, no study explained how documents were obtained. Similarly, observations were used as a method of data collection in eight studies but only one study (Zigmond, 1995) described how observations were conducted and recorded. Finally, two of the case studies contained no discussion of the methods used to collect the data for the study (Smith, 1992; Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991).

Another common problem with the eleven case studies examined was the failure of the majority of the studies to discuss the techniques or procedures used for data analysis. First, while four studies contained no discussion of the procedures used to analyze the data (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1991; Zigmond, 1995; Klenk, 1994; Lichtenstein, 1993) several studies provided only cursory explanations of their data analysis techniques. For instance, in Leone's (1994) study, which collected data from interviews, documents and observations, data analysis procedures consisted of "reviewing interviews" and "examining" notes taken from document reviews. However, the author failed to explain how interviews were reviewed or how documents were examined. Similarly, the data analysis procedures in MacArthur and Malouf 's (1991) study were also ambiguous. Although the authors developed a coding scheme to analyze their interviews, the authors failed to discuss the criteria used to develop the coding system or how the coding scheme was applied to the interview data.

Finally, although several studies did provide information about their data analysis procedures, their discussions of data analysis procedures were incomplete.

**Table 3**  
**Characteristics of Published Case Studies**

**Table 3 (cont'd)****Characteristics of Published Case Studies**

For instance, although studies by Reis, Neu and McGuire (1997), Bartelheim and Evans (1993), Richardson, Klein and Huber (1996), and Cousin, Aragon and Rojas (1993) all used multiple sources of evidence, the studies only discussed how interview data was analyzed; data collected from documents and observations were not discussed. Furthermore, although two specific techniques were used to analyze interview data, qualitative content analysis procedures (Smith, 1992, Reis, Neu & McGuire, 1997, Bartelheim & Evans, 1993) and constant comparative methods (Richardson, Klein & Huber, 1996; Cousin, Aragon & Rojas, 1993), none of the studies described how the analysis procedures were applied to their respective data.

The results of the examination of the use of case study methodology within special education research are significant for several reasons. First, although portrayed as a comprehensive research strategy which can meet the complex demands of conducting research in the educational system, few researchers employ the case study designs in special education research. Second, the high frequency of studies which were erroneously identified as being case study designs suggests that the case study is not fully understood as a research strategy. Finally, a review of the characteristics of published case studies highlights several key problems with case study designs. Specifically, most case studies lack clearly articulated research designs, fail to explain how data is collected and contain only cursory explanations of data analysis techniques. The lack of clearly articulated designs, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures raises questions about the studies' precision and rigor. Furthermore, the ambiguity regarding research designs and procedures means that the case studies examined have dubious reliability, since the studies cannot be repeated, and have questionable construct validity, since the studies collectively fail to explain or indicate the relevancy of their data sources to the studies.

In summary, a review of the characteristics of published case studies serves to reinforce traditional prejudices against case study research. Yin (1994), in his seminal work

on case study designs, argued that

The case study has long been stereotyped as a weak sibling among social science methods. Investigators who do case studies are regarded as having deviated from their academic disciplines, their investigations as having insufficient precision (that is, quantification), objectivity, and rigor (p.xiii).

Therefore, researchers selecting case study methodologies must keep in mind the difficulties commonly associated with case study designs and must ensure that case studies are both systematic and precise. Therefore, given the negative perceptions of case study research, this case study on individualized program plans was carefully designed to address many of the problems associated with case study designs. First, the purpose of this study was to explore educators' conceptual knowledge of individualized plans. Specifically, the intent of the research was to describe educators' understanding of the role of individualized plans within the educational system, as well as their understanding of the development and use of individualized plans. Therefore, the study's focus on description is in keeping with the intent of case study research. Second, the study's research design has been clearly articulated and the procedures used to collect and analyze data have been described and explained. A detailed discussion of the study's research design as well as the procedures used to collect and analyze data is presented in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

This chapter describes the methodology of the study. First, the design and participants are discussed. Second, the sources of data used are examined and the relevancy of each data source is discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the procedures used to collect and analyze the data.

#### **Design**

In order to achieve the study's objective of describing educators' conceptual understanding of Individualized Program Plans, the research was conducted using a case study design.

#### **Participants**

Merriam (1988) suggested that an appropriate method for selecting participants is criterion-based sampling in which a set of criteria for inclusion in the study is established and guides the selection process. Since the aim of this study was to explore educators' conceptual understanding of Individualized Program Plans, the criteria for inclusion in the study was the likelihood that participants had direct or indirect involvement with Individualized Program Plans. A decision was made to include educators from the provincial, school board, and school levels because these levels represent the main administrative divisions within the Alberta educational system (Alberta Education, 1995a, 1995b) and would provide a fuller description of educators' perceptions of IPPs.

Four senior administrators from the Special Education Branch of Alberta Education were identified and selected for interviews since they were likely, based on their job descriptions, to have extensive knowledge of IPPs and IPP related issues (Alberta Education, 1996). A summary of the participants' current positions, and educational backgrounds is contained in Table 4.

Table 4

## Characteristics of Interview Participants at the Provincial Level

Position	Gender	Education	Teaching Experience	Years in Current Position	Pre-Service Training	In-Service training
Senior Administrator	M	M.Ed.	elementary, junior high	3 years	no	no
Senior Administrator	M	PhD.	elementary, junior high	n.a.	no	no
Senior Administrator	M	M.A.	junior high,	n.a.	no	no
Senior Administrator	F	PhD.	elementary, junior, senior high	3 years	no	no

In addition to the participants at the provincial level, six school board personnel participated in the study. Specifically, two psychologists responsible for the psycho-educational assessments of students and four consultants responsible for helping schools and teachers develop individualized plans were interviewed. An overview of the individual characteristics of school board participants is presented in Table 5. At the school level, thirteen teachers plus the school's principal agreed to participate in the study. The individual characteristics of school level participants are given in Table 6.

### Data Sources

Data for this study was collected from three sources: documentation, individual interviews, and surveys.

#### Documents

Merriam (1988) stated that documents are a critical yet underutilized data source in case study research. Specifically she argues that documents "are a product of the context in which they are produced and therefore grounded in the real world" (Merriam,

1988, p.109). As a result, documents reflect, at least in part, the understanding, perceptions, and concerns of the environment in which they were created. The purpose of using documents related to Individualized Program Plans as a source of evidence in this study was to describe how the IPP is conceptualized in the documents. Two types of documents were collected: public documents, which were documents available to the public upon request, and internal documents, which were documents not typically available for public consultation. For example, internal memos and draft versions of documents were considered internal documents. A total of nine documents, seven from the provincial level and two from the school board level, were reviewed for this study. A list of the type of documents, authors and titles examined is included in Table 7.

Table 5

## Characteristics of Interview Participants at the School Board

<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Service with Board</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Pre-Service Training</b>	<b>In-Service Training</b>
Curriculum Consultant	F	B.Ed	12 years	8 years, elementary junior high	yes	no
Curriculum Consultant	F	B.Ed., M.Ed	7 years	3 years, elementary	no	yes
Psychologist	F	B.A., B.Ed., M.Sc.	2 years	1 year, elementary, junior high	no	no
Psychologist	F	B.A., M.Ed.	8 months	none	no	no
Language Arts Consultant	F	B.Ed., M.Ed.	14 years	5 years, junior high	no	no
Behaviour Consultant	F	B.Ed.	18 years	3 years, elementary	no	yes



Table 6

## Characteristics of Interview Participants at the School Level

<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Pre-Service Training</b>	<b>In-Service Training</b>
Kindergarten Teacher	F	B.Ed.	2 years, kindergarten	no	no
Generalist, Grade 3-4	F	B.Sc., B.Ed.	2 years, elementary	no	no
Generalist, grade 3 & Grade 6	F	B.A., B.Ed.	First year	no	no
Generalist, Grade 5, Art & Music	M	B.A., B.Ed.	5 years, elementary	no	no
Corrective learning teacher	F	B.SC., B.Ed.	10 years, elementary	unsure	no
Generalist, grade 2	F	B.A., Diploma in Education	20 years, elementary	unsure	no
Resource Teacher	F	B.Ed.	18 years, elementary	no	yes
Principal	F	B.Ed., M.Ed.	19 years, elementary, junior high	no	no
Generalist, Grade 2 & 3	F	B.Ed., Certificate in Early Childhood Education	11 years, elementary	no	no

Table 6 (cont'd)

## Characteristics of Interview Participants at the School Level

<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Teaching Experience</b>	<b>Pre-Service Training</b>	<b>In-Service Training</b>
Generalist, Grade 1	F	B.Ed.	4 years, elementary	no	no
Generalist, grade 5	F	B.Ed.	14 years, elementary	no	no
Assistant Principal, Grade 5 & 6	M	B.A., B.Ed., M.A.	14 years, elementary, junior high, senior high	no	no
Generalist, Grade 1	F	B.A., B.Ed.	3 years, junior high	no	no
Generalist, Grade 4	F	B.Ed.	9 years, elementary	no	no

Interviews

Interviews are essential sources of case study evidence (Yin, 1994) which provide reliable and effective methods of data collection (Merriam, 1988; Stainback & Stainback, 1988). There were two reasons for using interviews in this study. First, interviews were used to explore educators' conceptions of Individualized Program Plans. Second, interviews provided opportunities for educators to share and discuss their experiences with IPPs. Using interviews as a means to probe individuals' perceptions and to explore their experiences with IPPs is consistent with Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) interpretation of interviews as tools "used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p.96).

All interviews were conducted using a semi-structured qualitative interview format. Merriam (1988) described the semi-structured interview as a conversation

between participants which is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored. However, unlike structured interviews, the exact wording and order of the questions are not rigidly defined. The semi-structured interview is an appropriate technique when "certain information is desired from all respondents" (Merriam, 1988, p.74). Since one of the primary goals of this study is to examine educators' understandings of IPPs, it was appropriate to ask all educators about their conceptions regarding the purposes and uses of IPPs.

Table 7

## IPP Documents Examined

<b>Document Type</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>
Public	Special Education Branch	1997	Guide to education for students with special needs
Internal	Special Education Branch	1997	Individualized Program Plan (IPP) Checklist
Internal	Special Education Branch	1997	Parent involvement in the IPP Process
Public	Special Education Branch	1997	Transition planning for young adults with intellectual disabilities
Public	Special Education Branch	1996	Partners during changing times: An information booklet for parents of children with special needs
Public	Special Education Branch	1996	Special education funding: A handbook of procedures and definitions
Public	Special Education Branch	1995	Individualized Program Plans
Internal	School Board	1997	Individual Program Plans
Internal	School Board	1997	Student Services special education yellow pages

An interview guide was developed by the researcher and contained questions on four basic areas: educational and professional background, development of IPPs, use of IPPs, and role of IPPs in the educational system. A copy of the interview guide is included in Appendix A. The interview guide was tested on two teachers prior to its use in the study. Following the pilot interviews, the researcher discussed the teachers' interpretations of the questions and asked for suggestions to improve the interview guide. Based on their comments a total of five questions identified as being redundant were removed.

### Surveys

Surveys are appropriate research instruments when research questions focus on self-reported beliefs and behaviours and when the aim of the research is quantification, explanation or exploration (Neuman, 1994). The purpose of using surveys in this study was to gain insight into teachers experiences with Individualized Program Plans. Specifically, the survey was used to explore teachers' use of IPPs, their perceptions of the value Individualized Program Plans, and their understanding of the functions of IPPs within the educational system. The survey was developed by the researcher based on previous studies of IEP development and use in schools found in the literature (Dudley-Marling, 1985; Gerber, Banbury, Miller & Griffin, 1986; Margolis & Truesdall, 1989; Morgan & Rhode, 1983; Nevin, McCann, & Semmel, 1983; Sands, Adams & Stout, 1995). A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix B.

Each questionnaire consisted of 20 items, representing a total of four general categories. The four general categories consisted of the following:

- 1) *Teacher Characteristics*: Items in this category asked about demographic information as well as about the number of students with IPPs that teachers currently teach or have taught during their careers.

- 2) *Use of IPPs*: Items in this category focused on how IPPs were used by teachers.
- 3) *Effectiveness of IPPs*: Items in this category asked teachers to rate the usefulness and value of IPPs.
- 4) *Conceptions*: Items in this category asked teachers to identify the functions of IPPs.

The questionnaire was reviewed by a group of eight educators prior to its use in the study. The educators consisted of one professor of special education, four graduate students completing degrees in school psychology and special education, and three classroom teachers. All three classroom teachers were currently providing services to students with disabilities. Educators in the pilot study were asked to comment on the clarity of the statements and to recommend improvements. Based on their comments three major changes were made to the questionnaire. First, questions dealing with the storage of Individualized Program Plans were removed from the questionnaire. Second, questions containing vague and imprecise words, such as the words 'good' and 'clear', were identified as being confusing and ambiguous. As a result, a total of seven questions had vague terminology removed. Third, changes to the physical layout of the questionnaire were made to improve readability and presentation of questions.

## **Procedures**

### **Document Review**

The researcher conducted an initial search for public documents related to IPPs by contacting the Special Education Branch of Alberta Education and by searching Alberta Education's Internet Website (<http://ednet.edc.gov.ca>). A record of all inquiries, search terms (for electronic searches) and location of each document was kept. The public documents were available in local libraries or directly from the Special Education Branch.

### Interviews at the Provincial Level

Interviews were conducted with members of the Special Education Branch of Alberta Education in January 1998 and ranged in length from 45 minutes to 110 minutes. Each interview began with a discussion of the purposes of the research, the possible benefits of participating in the research, and the researcher's expectations regarding informant participation. After discussing and signing a consent form, informants were asked to supply basic demographic information, to reflect on their understanding of IPPs and to describe their personal experiences with the Individualized Program Plan. As part of the interviews, informants were asked to identify any public documents that they felt the researcher should examine. In addition, each participant was asked about any internal documents which may assist the researcher's understanding of IPPs. As a result, copies of two internal documents were given to the researcher.

Following completion of the interviews, each interview was transcribed by the researcher in order to produce a hard copy of the interview. The interview questions and responses were then mailed to the informants so that they could revise, change or add comments. Informants were asked to return the responses to the researcher in a pre-addressed, stamped envelope which the researcher provided. All transcripts were returned to the researcher by March 26, 1998.

### Interviews at the School Board Level

In order to determine key individuals in relation to individualized program plans at the school board level, the researcher contacted the three school board supervisors responsible for curriculum development, behavioral adaptation programs and psycho-educational assessments. The supervisors identified key members of their staff who either worked closely with individualized program plans or had knowledge of individualized program plans. The researcher contacted the eight staff members individually to discuss

the study and request their participation in the study. Interviews were conducted with members of the school board in April and May 1998 and ranged in length from 45 minutes to 75 minutes. Each interview began with a discussion of the purposes of the research, the possible benefits of participating in the research, and the researcher's expectations regarding informant participation. After discussing and signing a consent form, informants were asked to discuss their educational and professional backgrounds, to reflect on their understanding of IPPs and to describe their personal experiences with the Individualized Program Plan. As part of the interviews, participants were asked to supply any internal documents which they felt the research would benefit from examining. As a result, one internal school board document was supplied to the researcher.

After completing the interviews, each interview was transcribed by the researcher. The interview questions and responses were then mailed to the informants in order that they could revise, change or add comments. Informants were asked to return the responses to the researcher in a pre-addressed, stamped envelop. All transcripts were returned to the researcher by June 2, 1998.

### Selecting a School

In order to select a school for the study, the researcher first contacted the research officer responsible for special projects within the school board to discuss the study and obtain the board's permission to contact schools within its jurisdiction. After discussing the study with the research officer, the researcher was faxed the names of two schools that the research officer felt would likely participate. The researcher telephoned the principals of both schools to discuss the research study. Although both principals agreed that a study on Individualized Program Plans was a worthwhile endeavour, both principals said their schools were already involved in several school-based research projects and therefore declined to participate. The researcher then contacted the board's research officer and was

provided with the names of four more schools which might be willing to participate. The researcher contacted each school principal and arranged a meeting to discuss the research project. The intent of this meeting was to formally introduce and explain the research project, discuss the nature of the school's involvement and to address any concerns which the principals might have regarding participation. Two schools declined to participate after the meeting with the researcher; the remaining two schools agreed to participate. The researcher selected the participating school because of the principal's obvious support and enthusiasm for the study and because the school was currently in the process of developing Individualized Program Plans for four students recently identified as having special educational needs.

#### Surveys at the School Level

The researcher attended a school staff meeting in February, 1998 in order to introduce herself and to explain her research. The intent of the meeting was to describe the research study, to emphasize the critical importance of teacher participation, to describe the type of involvement required from teachers, and to discuss the issue of confidentiality for individuals and for the school. In addition, the researcher distributed the survey on IPPs. The survey, along with a cover letter describing the study, was given to each teacher in attendance at the meeting. The school principal volunteered to place the survey and cover letter in the mailboxes of teachers not in attendance at the meeting. Teachers were asked to complete the survey and place it in an envelop posted on the main bulletin board in the staff room.

#### Interviews at the School Level

Following the meeting with the school's staff, the research contacted the school principal to arrange for an individual interview. The interview with the principal took



place in February 1998 and lasted for 110 minutes. The first twenty-five minutes of the interview was devoted to creating a profile of the school and obtaining background information regarding the type of programs offered by the school, the number of personnel and a general discussion of the school's involvement with IPPs. The remaining 85 minutes were devoted to an examination of the principal's understanding of Individualized Program Plans and the principal was asked the same questions as other participants in the study.

After the meeting with the school principal, the researcher asked for and obtained the names of all the teachers currently working at the school. At the time of the study, the school had fourteen teachers on staff. The researcher contacted teachers individually to ask for their participation in the study and all fourteen teachers agreed to be interviewed. Interviews at the school began in February 1998 and were completed in April 1998. All interviews took place at the school either during the lunch hour, after school, or during the teachers' prep time. Interviews with teachers ranged in length from 30 minutes to 85 minutes. All interviews began with a discussion of the purposes of the research, the possible benefits of participating in the research, and the researcher's expectations regarding informant participation. After discussing and signing a consent form, each participant was asked to discuss their educational and professional background, to reflect on their understanding of IPPs and to describe their own experiences with the Individualized Program Plan. During the interviews, participants were asked to supply any internal documents which the school uses in regards to IPPs. As a result, one internal document was provided to the researcher.

Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed each interview and then sent the transcript to the participants so that they could revise, change or add comments. The participants were provided with envelopes in which to place their transcripts after they had reviewed them. The participants were asked to seal their transcripts and return them to the secretary in the main office where the researcher would

collect them. In addition to the interview transcript, the researcher included the survey results as well as two written questions regarding the survey with the transcripts.

Teachers were asked to review the survey results and were asked to respond to the following questions:

- ▶ Do you think these results accurately reflect what is going on in your school in terms of IPPs? Why or why not?
- ▶ What do you think these results say about IPPs?

All fourteen transcripts were returned to the principal and data collection at the school was completed in May 1998.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the conduct of the study, all possible steps were taken to ensure the ethical treatment of participants as well as the safe and accurate collection and presentation of data.

#### **Informed Consent for Interviews**

All participants were asked to read and sign a consent form prior to all interviews. Through the initial discussion and the consent form, participants were informed of the following:

- the purpose of the interview was to explore the participant's understanding and experience with IPPs
- interviews would last approximately one hour
- participation in the interview was voluntary and participants had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty
- interviews would be recorded on audio cassettes unless participants do not want the interview taped
- participants would be sent copy of their individual responses for their approval

- the researcher may take written notes during the interviews
- participation in the interview did not place the participant at greater physical or psychological hazard than would be faced in everyday life

#### Confidentiality of Data

- the researcher and her advisor alone would have access to the documents and records
- tapes of interviews would be erased after the informant had approved and/or revised the responses
- all documents, interview transcripts and survey results would be kept by the researcher for a period of one year following completion of the study. Public documents gathered for the study would be offered to the University of Calgary Library while all other records would be destroyed
- all surveys were anonymous and voluntary

#### Anonymity of Subjects

- the personal names of participants would not appear in the final report or in any subsequent publication which may result from the study. However, participants may be identified by job function (ie. teacher, principal, provincial planner).

#### Reporting of Results

- the results of the case study would be presented in the form of a Master's thesis to the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Calgary.
- a copy of the thesis would be kept by the University of Calgary
- results of the research may be used in academic publications or at conferences

#### **Data Analysis**

### Documents

Public and internal documents were analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative content analysis procedures. First, in order to identify themes in the documents, a qualitative content analysis of the documents was conducted using Strauss's (1987) three step coding system (in Neuman, 1994). The first step of the qualitative content analysis, known as open coding, involved a review of the data in an attempt to locate critical terms, concepts and recurring ideas. Once located, the relevant information was marked. The second step of coding, known as axial coding, involved a review and examination of the codes identified during the open coding phase. The purpose of the axial coding phase was to organize concepts, terms, and ideas into consistent themes. The final step of coding, known as selective coding, involved scanning all data and previously established codes "for cases that illustrate themes and make comparisons and contrasts" (Neuman, 1994, p.409).

After identifying and examining the themes revealed through qualitative content analysis procedures, a quantitative content analysis of the documents was conducted. Neuman (1994) defines quantitative content analysis as the use of "objective and systematic counting and recording procedures to produce a quantitative description of the symbolic content in a text" (Neuman, 1994, p.262). In this study, the frequency of the themes identified by qualitative content analysis was determined by counting the number of times a theme occurred in a source. In order to facilitate the recording of analysis results a coding sheet was used. A copy of the coding form is included in Appendix C.

### Interviews

Data collected from interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis procedures. Qualitative content analysis involves the discovery and identification of relevant themes and issues in a data source by carefully reviewing the "words, phrases,

patterns of behaviour, subjects' ways of thinking and events" which have been collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.166). In other words, the themes and issues "should emerge from the data" (Stainback & Stainback, 1988, p.62). The qualitative content analysis in this study differed from traditional qualitative analysis in that three themes, roles, development and use, had been determined by the researcher prior to the start of the study. However, while the themes were of importance to the researcher, the researcher acknowledged that other themes emerged from the interviews and hence was willing to examine other themes which developed during the course of the study.

The qualitative content analysis of interviews transcripts was conducted using Strauss's (1987) three step coding system (in Neuman, 1994). First, transcripts were reviewed in order to locate critical terms, concepts and recurring ideas. Once located, the relevant information was marked. Second, the critical terms, concepts and recurring ideas were then re-examined in order to organize them into consistent themes. Finally, all data and themes were reviewed in order to select "cases that illustrate themes and make comparisons and contrasts" (Neuman, 1994, p.409).

### Surveys

Results of the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Elmes, Kantowitz and Roediger (1995) state that descriptive statistics provide a "summarizing and systematizing function" (p.367) in relation to data. Since the purpose of the study was to describe educators' understanding, perception and use of IPPs, descriptive statistics were an appropriate form of analysis for the survey results.

The frequency for each response category (agree, somewhat agree, undecided, somewhat disagree, disagree) was calculated for each question as was the percentage of teachers selecting each response category. In addition the mode for item was calculated. A summary of the number of teachers selecting each response category was provided to

the teachers along with their interview transcripts so that they could comment or expand on the results.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study on Individualized Program Plans was to examine educators' perceptions and understanding of the IPP. In order to achieve its goal of describing educators' perceptions of IPPs, the study used a qualitative case study design. Participants included educators at three levels of the educational system: the provincial level, the school board level and the school level since these levels represent the major divisions within the Alberta school system. Data for the study was collected from three sources of data: documents, individual interviews, and surveys. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the surveys while a combination of qualitative and quantitative procedures were used to analyze the data collected from interviews and documents.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Results from Analysis of Provincial Documents**

A content analysis of provincial documents related to IPPs resulted in the identification of seven themes related to the role, development and use of Individualized Program Plans. Table 8 presents an overview of the themes, the frequency of their appearance and the number of documents in which they were identified.

Table 8

#### **Themes Present in Provincial Documents**

Themes	Total Frequency	Number of Documents
Accountability	6	2
Comprehensiveness	11	5
Planning	11	5
Collaboration	16	6
Communication	9	3
Flexibility	4	2
Monitoring of Progress	7	2

#### **Results from Analysis of School Board Documents**

A content analysis of school board documents resulted in the identification of five themes related to the role, development and use of Individualized Program Plans. Table 9 presents an overview of the themes, the frequency of their appearance and the number of documents in which they were identified.

Table 9

## Themes Present in School Board Documents

Themes	Total Frequency	Number of Documents
Collaboration	10	2
Communication	5	2
Planning	6	2
Flexibility	3	1
Monitoring of Progress	4	1

Description of Themes in Provincial and School Board Documents

*Accountability:* The IPP provides documentation of the changes to a student's educational program and is intended to ensure that students with special needs are provided with appropriate educational programs.

*Comprehensiveness:* The IPP contains information about a broad range of areas including academic, social, and emotional needs, as well as medical information, demographic information, classroom accommodations, transition plans, and goals, objectives, and strategies for each student.

*Planning:* The IPP is intended to help teachers plan and select instructional activities for their students with special needs.

*Collaboration:* IPP development is a cooperative activity with teachers, parents, students contributing to the process of development. As well, other professionals (ie. social workers, pediatricians) may be involved in generating IPPs if appropriate.



*Communication:* The IPP facilitates discussion of a student's program and provides opportunities for teachers, educational professionals and parents to share information about a student's strengths, needs and accomplishments.

*Flexibility:* The procedures used to develop an IPP as well as the contents of the IPP are not rigidly defined but should reflect the needs and abilities of the student. In particular, goals and objectives may be modified during the school year to reflect the changing needs and abilities of the student.

*Monitoring of Progress:* IPP objectives are monitored throughout the year in order to evaluate the student's growth and progress toward the goals and objectives specified in the IPP.

#### Summary of Results from Document Analysis

A review of the themes revealed during analysis of provincial and school board documents suggest that provincial and school board documents contain similar themes related to the purpose, development and use of IPPs. In terms of the purpose for the Individualized Program Plan, provincial and school board documents indicate that the IPP is intended to be a planning document to help teachers develop instructional activities as well to facilitate communication among professionals and parents. In addition, both provincial and school board documents characterized the development of the IPP as a collaborative process involving teachers, related educational professionals, parents and students. Furthermore, both sets of documents described IPP development as a flexible process and characterized the IPP document as a working document which may be modified or changed to reflect the learner's needs. Finally, both provincial and school board documents suggested that the IPP should be used to plan programs and

instructional activities as well as to monitor student progress.

Despite sharing a majority of themes, an analysis of provincial documents uncovered two themes not evident in the school board documents. First, provincial documents presented the IPP as a document which exists for the purpose of accountability. Second, provincial documents described the IPP as a comprehensive document which contains academic as well as social, emotional, vocational, and life skills objectives.

### **Results from Questionnaire**

As part of data collection, teachers were asked to complete questionnaires on their use of IPPs as well as their perceptions of the role and value of the Individualized Program Plans. Questionnaire items 5 through 13 focused on IPP use. The number of teachers selecting each response category appear in Table 10. In addition, the mode for each item appears in bold print in the table. The teachers surveyed indicated that one of the uses for the IPP was as a source of information regarding a student's academic needs. Of the twelve teachers surveyed, only one teacher indicated that the IPP was never used to obtain information about academic needs. A majority of teachers also indicated that the IPP was used to obtain information about students' social and emotional needs. Eight of twelve teachers responded that the IPP was used either 'always' or 'sometimes' to get information about social and emotional needs of learners; the remaining four teachers reported that the IPP was 'rarely' or 'never' used to obtain information about social and emotional needs. A majority of teachers surveyed also reported that they either 'always', 'frequently' or 'sometimes' used an IPP to recommend changes to a student's program, to plan instruction. Furthermore, while ten of the twelve teachers indicated that they used an IPP to consult

with other professionals regarding a student, a majority of teachers also responded that they either 'rarely' or 'never' used an IPP to consult with parents.

Table 10

## IPP Use

Statement- Use IPPs to	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
Plan instruction	1	1	5	2	3	12
Consult with parents	1	1	2	3	5	12
Get information about social/emotional needs	1	0	7	1	3	12
Evaluate student progress	1	0	5	2	4	12
Recommend changes to a student's program	1	1	6	2	2	12
Consult with other professionals	2	3	5	0	2	12
Get information about academic needs	2	5	4	0	1	12
Get information about career interests	0	0	1	0	11	12
Record student progress	1	2	2	3	4	12
TOTAL	10	13	37	13	35	108

While the uses for the IPP described by teachers in the survey correspond to both provincial guidelines regarding IPP use as well as common uses described in the literature, less encouraging is the overall frequency of IPP use in schools. Less than one-quarter of all responses related to the use of IPPs fell in the "always" or "frequently" categories. Furthermore, the number of responses in the "never use" category almost equalled the number of responses in the "sometimes used" category. In addition, the most frequently selected response category was "sometimes used". When viewed collectively, the results on IPP use indicate that Individualized Program Plans are not used on a regular basis.

Teachers were also asked to reflect on their perception of the value of Individualized Program Plans and their responses are presented in Table 11. Teachers surveyed indicated that the IPP is perceived as a useful tool for obtaining information about a student's academic strengths, as well as their social, emotional and academic needs. However, responses also indicated that a majority of teachers believed they could teach as effectively without using an IPP and a minority of teachers believed that an IPP improves the quality of education for students with special needs. Moreover, three of the twelve teachers believed that the time spent developing an IPP justifies the IPP's worth.

Table 12 presents the results of questionnaire item 20 regarding teachers' conceptions of the role of IPPs. As indicated in Table 12, teachers perceived the IPP to have several roles within the educational system. Eleven of the twelve teachers identified the IPP as an instructional guide while ten teachers described the IPP as a summary of a current goals and objectives for a student. Three-quarters of teachers also indicated that the IPP was a curriculum for students with special needs as well as a working document. Interestingly, five of twelve teachers indicated that the IPP was a legal contract while 2 teachers also indicated that the IPP was a tool to monitor the effectiveness of teachers.

Table 11

## Value of IPP

Statement	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Undecided	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Total
Provides an understanding of student strengths	1	6	3	2	0	12
Provides an understanding of student difficulties	3	8	1	0	0	12
Could teach as effectively without an IPP	6	2	2	1	1	12
Provides an understanding of how to teach a student	2	7	2	0	1	12
Improves quality of education	1	4	4	1	2	12
Time developing an IPP justifies its worth	1	2	4	2	3	12
TOTAL	14	29	16	6	7	72

Table 12

## Role of the IPP

<b>Statement: The IPP is:</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
a curriculum for student with special needs	9
a daily plan	2
a legal contract	5
a report card to evaluate student progress	4
a summary of current goals and objectives	10
a summary of annual goals and objectives	8
a tool to monitor the effectiveness of teachers	2
a working document	9
an administrative document	7
an instructional guide	11
other: - a guideline of a student's individual strengths, needs and areas to focus on - a unit plan - a document that exists almost exclusively with the resource teacher	3

Summary of Results from Questionnaires

In summary, the results of the questionnaires indicate that teachers assign a variety of roles to the IPP: instructional guide, summary of current goals and objectives, curriculum for exceptional, summary of annual goals and objectives, and administrative document. Results also suggest a degree of uncertainty regarding the scope of the IPP. While three-quarters of teachers characterized the IPP as a working document, a

perception which implies a flexible and adaptable document, five of the twelve teachers surveyed also indicated that the IPP was a legal contract, a perception which implies a rigid and binding document.

Furthermore, despite perceptions of the IPP as a multipurpose document, results indicate that the IPP is not used on a regular basis. IPPs were used infrequently to plan instruction, consult with parents, obtain information regarding a student social and emotional needs, evaluate student progress, or to record student progress. Results of the questionnaires did indicate however that a majority of teachers used IPPs regularly to obtain information about academic needs. Finally, results of the questionnaire suggest that teachers valued the IPP as an information document, a tool which provides them with a greater understanding of student's strengths, needs, and learning styles. However, the IPP was not valued as a teaching tool, with the majority of teachers indicating that the IPP did not increase the effectiveness of their teaching.

### **Results from Interviews**

Interviews were designed to gather information about three areas related to IPPs: purpose, development, and use. Data from the interviews with provincial, school board and school based educators were classified according to ten major themes. There were two themes related to the purpose of IPPs: instructional guide and accountability. There were five themes related to the development of IPPs: special educator dominance, desire for more collaboration, parents as supports, parents as partners, and time. There were three themes related to the use of IPPs: limited use by generalists, school based supports, and professional development.

## **PURPOSE**

### **(1) Instructional Guide**

Educators at all three levels of the educational system described the IPP as a document which focuses teachers on the needs of their exceptional students and helps them to plan accommodate for the learning needs of students with IPPs. As the school principal explained, IPPs provide insight into the long-term needs and objectives for a student:

It's that process of lying it down and thinking about that student. Once you have done that you know your year is in place and it's almost part of your rhythm with that child. It's kind of very important. It sets out what you are going to do with this child. And once you've done it thoroughly, you can just act on it. And it's very clear where you are going with that child. And your outcomes are very clear.

The school's resource teacher suggested that the IPP "almost becomes a crutch in a way because if you don't know where you need to go, you double check and say I have more to go here, I have more to teach here. You know it kind of re-focuses you".

The school's grade three teacher that the IPP is "an underlying theme for their [teachers'] planning for the child". She believed that :

One of the things you make use of, if you know the child is more auditory than visual, you are going to adapt your lessons completely differently. You are going to have him placed differently in the room. You're going to have more aide time with him. You are going to accommodate him the best that you can because the more that you know about this child, the more you can help him. The teacher can learn so much more and can adapt the program so much better.

The perception of the IPP as a plan or guide was also expressed at the school board level. One of the school board's language arts consultant explained her view of the IPP:

Well, I think it is a guide. It's an instrument that kind of reminds a teacher about, you know, these are the areas I have chosen to focus on. Certainly it won't be all of the



child's program but you are just separating a few things and saying these are the areas that I can focus on. And these are the areas of greatest need or whatever.

The board's behavioral consultant, described her view of the IPP as an aid to planning:

It certainly helps her [the teacher] know the child better. Helps her to look at strengths and weaknesses, using the strengths of the child sometimes to remediate the weaknesses. I think for teachers it also gives them a sense of planning. Often times the IPP as far as I am concerned, and let's look at behaviour, that's the interventions that are in place for the year with changes all the time. And it helps you see growth in the children. It also helps you see where they need extra support.

The perception of the IPP as a tool for instructional planning was also expressed by provincial administrators. One senior administrator involved with developing resources for teachers described his interpretation of an IPP:

An IPP, in my view, is a plan made by people who are knowledgeable about the student. It's an intent to provide a program. It's having arrived at a consensus in my view and it's a direction that has been set for the program. I don't see it as a document that doesn't change but I see it as at this point in time these are the priorities for this child. Then I see it as something that is reviewed and adapted and adjusted.

Another provincial administrator stated that the IPP has to be a working document and went on to state that

I think that if it is something that is just written for the sake of being written and is never used, that's not the intent of it. I think it is often trial and error. It is often you try something, it doesn't work, we have to try something else and that's on an on-going basis.

## **(2) Accountability**

In discussing the purpose of Individualized Program Plans, several educators stated that IPPs are developed for the purpose of accountability. The school's assistant principal explained that

the purpose of the IPP is to substantiate a special education program for students with special needs. You have to substantiate it in the following ways. We have to substantiate it for funding from the government. That is a very important purpose of that. If I don't have an IPP on a student, I'm not eligible for funding so it's very bureaucratic in a lot of ways. Another purpose is to substantiate to parents and to the principal and to other parties concerned why this child is in special education, what this child is doing, why they are doing it, and how they will get better by doing this program.

The fourth grade generalist teacher also associated IPPs with justifying a special education program:

I know that now there is also a real problem with this accountability business, going all the way back to money in so far as the government wants to prove this child really needs to be in special education and so there has to be a proof that this child is behind where he should be and he can't fit into a regular classroom and needs extra help.

Beyond funding purposes a curriculum specialist with the school board suggested that teachers need IPPs to explain changes in a program and to explain a child's performance at the end of the year:

Everyone knows what the goals are prior to instructing the student. I think people know what goals are being set so that it's sort of a way for the classroom teacher to modify programs so that you know, they don't get to the end of the year and the parents ask why didn't Johnny get 73% or pass on the achievement test or whatever it was. If that isn't something Johnny is capable of doing, I think it is a safe guard. We know before we start what it is we are going to do and, you know, when we finish how much we have accomplished. So I think it is in the classroom teacher's best interest to have that document available in this day and age of accountability.

The behavioral consultant echoed the concern over accountability in her explanation of why IPPs are needed:

I believe that if you are going to place a child in special education, there needs to be an individual program plan... Just face the fact that the whole accountability thing is a thing of the nineties so you had better make sure that when you are talking to parents about a program that you are going to have in place in the classroom for their child

that they are very well aware of it.

On the other hand, she also expressed concern about the IPP as a document for accountability:

It is the accountability issue that I guess I am less clear cut about. I think it is important to be accountable about students. That's really why we have report cards. But now we have another document in addition to the report card. Do we want it to play an accountability role or do we want to keep the report card as our primary accountability instrument? And I am not sure how I feel about that.

The fourth grade generalist also voiced concern over how regular education teachers perceive the accountability function of the IPP:

And I think that it is the accountability factor that I mentioned earlier that causes a lot of regular education teachers a lot of anguish about some of their students with special needs because they think if I put it on paper and then because this child is so complex I can't carry it out. They really feel that they are being asked to promise something that they may not be able to deliver. And they really worry about that.

The school board's behavioral consultant, echoed this concern: "I have heard some teachers say if the child does not achieve this objective, is this a reflection on my teaching?"

## **DEVELOPMENT**

### **(3) Special educator dominance**

Most of the teachers interviewed indicated that their students' IPPs were developed by the school's resource teacher. One teacher, who had two students in his homeroom with IPPs, was not involved in developing his students' IPPs. When asked how he felt about not being involved, he commented "I'm not a key person in that respect. Obviously it is something that the resource teacher is responsible for". The exclusion of generalist teachers from IPP development was echoed by the school's third grade teacher who only recently became aware that she had students on IPPs because "the resource

teacher said that I need to come in and sign the IPP".

The school's second grade teacher also reflected on her lack of involvement in IPP development:

You see I do have some students that I teach social studies to and some that are involved with IPPs, but I'm not involved with that process because I'm not considered the homeroom teacher.

Another teacher expressed her frustration at not being involved in IPP development:

I had a lot of students who were on this IPP. I never saw this IPP. And I was their teacher. They were taken out for math and LA [language arts] and special courses and then they were re-integrated. Well the IPP wasn't discussed with me. I taught a child last year who was on the IPP and I never saw the IPP and yes he's ADD. And I even met with the staff at the children's hospital and I worked with the team, it was the DAT team, and they asked me questions specific to the IPP and it was a good thing the resource teacher was there because dummy me the generalist teacher did not have a clue what they were talking about. Psychologist's reports, reports from clinicians? What reports? That was all with resource. Well he's fully integrated and I didn't have anything. So I felt like really the generalist teacher is working on her own.

On the other hand, the school's resource teacher described a process of developing IPPs which included the regular classroom teacher:

... I get information from the classroom teacher. The way it's set-up, the way it's set up now, for a student to be able to come into the resource room and be formally placed, and to receive an IPP and be formally placed, there needs to be a lot of input from the classroom teacher. Together we work to plan an IPP. In fact for one of my students, the classroom teacher and myself did an IPP and then this child was formally placed.

#### **(4) Desire for more collaboration**

Educators at both the school board and school level expressed a desire to be more involved with IPP development and use. For example, one of the fourth grade generalists suggested that

If the child is going to be integrated into your class, definitely you should be part of the interview. You should be part of the program. Let's say I'm teaching a Michael, I have to teach him social studies. Okay? Because I teach social studies to his class, he's going to be integrated into my class. I should at least be part of the IPP to know what everybody is doing. If he's got special concessions for exams, if he's got special homework, special plans, I want to be in on it. So I think every teacher does also. So if there are five teachers being integrated for Michael, five teachers should be sitting there looking at the IPP. Maybe the resource teacher will write the most because she or he will have that student for five hours in the day, but certainly everybody should know about this child.

One teacher responsible for a grade three-four split class expressed her belief that she could reinforce or support the resource teacher's efforts:

So you know if they're writing a story [in the resource room], you get the kid to write the story as well. You bring it to the resource teacher and find out if they are improving or not and how you can help them continue on.

Another generalist believed that her involvement in developing IPPs for her students would provide her with a greater understanding of her students' needs and she "would be able to look at it [the IPP] and see if there were some ways I could incorporate some of those ideas into the amount that I taught the child". The school's corrective learning teacher expressed the same sentiment based on her experience with pull out programs:

Once it is developed and it's all done perhaps the resource and the classroom teacher and probably the principal too, because these are special needs students, should sit down and go over it and talk about how the classroom teacher can use that information in her classroom. I have seen a lot of times children who are on IPPs who are taken out of the classroom into a resource room, which is fine I don't think that should stop, but they are also in the classroom and there might be something the classroom teacher can use from that so the student can benefit as well in the classroom.

The desire for more generalist involvement was commented on by the board's behavioral consultant:

When we did our workshop in the fall, the first three were for regular teachers and the turn out was overwhelming. Really. They knew they didn't have to be there. It was

by invitation. If you didn't want to come that's fine. And they were very open to having people come into their classroom and work with them. The desire for more collaboration was also evident at the school board level. For instance, both psychologists interviewed believed they could contribute to the IPP process. One psychologist suggested that

From the ones I do see, skimming over and making sure all the signatures are there, I have seen better and worse IPPs. And some are very..., like I can sense that there is an individual that is being presented here rather than there is a computer program that spits out recommendations for somebody with a writing problem. You know, here are three recommendations that they give everybody with a writing problem rather than something that is specific to the child. So I think that's a way that I can support that because you've had a different interaction with the child. You can give some information on how to individualize for the child.

On the other hand, the second psychologist felt that she could contribute to IPP development by

Speaking generally about different profiles of what we expect. Like let's say for a DDII [moderate developmental delay], to say what problems they might have. If we could generalize certain children, like let's say we're talking about Down Syndrome, what we'd expect that generally they would need help in this area or even working with the child we would know and we could be a part of that.

### **(5) Parents as Supports**

Data from interviews revealed a contrasting perception of the role of parents. Although respectful of the responsibilities parents have in educating their children, school based educators as well as their colleagues at the school board described the role of parents largely as a supportive role. For instance, the school's corrective learning teacher explained that "parents need to be made aware of the child's needs and there are things that they can be doing at home with the kids to help them out" but went on to state that "I don't think parents should have input into what is on the IPP but they should certainly be aware that it is there, know what's on it and have it discussed with them".

A fourth grade teacher expressed similar sentiments toward parental participation:

I think that, yeah, we really need to respect the parents as the first teachers. That's for sure. If there is anyone who knows their children it's the parent. However the way a child behaves and learns at home is often very, very different than at school. So I would not ask the parent to be part of the IPP planning but I would definitely have the parent involved after the IPP is in place to say that this is what we as professionals think, and since we are working with your child we feel it's best if we do this. Could you please help us at home by doing this? But they shouldn't, I really don't think that they should be part of writing up the IPP with us.

The school principal indicated that parental support for the educational process in general, and for the IPP specifically, was crucial to the IPP. She explained:

Their input is really important. Their support. How can they support us. They have to be in line with what we are doing and understand what we are going to be doing and how to support us at home. We can't do a whole lot unless there is support from home. It is like any educational program. So we try to tell how they can work with their child at home.

However, when asked to explain how parents should be involved in the IPP process, the principal went on to explain:

Their information about their home life and their life styles, that is really important to use developing the program because then we know the background. Has this child had a great deal of exposure? What's happening at home? Is there continuity? Do they go to a baby sitter? Do they go right home? Can we count on them to do reading? What are their own coping skills? So they provide us with information that is invaluable in designing the program, you know, because maybe we can only go so far.

#### **(6) Parents as Partners**

Although all four provincial administrators indicated that the level and intensity of parental involvement will vary according to the needs and abilities of parents, all provincial administrators suggested that parental involvement in decisions which affect their children is a significant aspect of IPP development. For instance, one provincial administrator explained that parents need to be involved in developing IPPs because they "can offer strategies or goals that they would like their child to accomplish in the year". Another provincial administrator described an extensive role for parents in IPP

development:

Participation in everything from the initial screening, giving consent from assessment, having test results interpreted, the school explaining to the parent the advantages and disadvantages of the different placement, parents signing for consent, parental participation in the IPP and so forth. I think anytime you are adapting and modifying away from the norm it becomes increasingly important that the parent is part of the decision making. It just makes sense to me that it wouldn't be that way.

Another provincial administrator explained that:

There are some parents that it is very difficult to get them to participate for whatever but I say to you now we shouldn't assume that parents may not want to participate. We always need to be extending the offer. We always need to be asking for their input. The onus is on us as professionals.

#### **(7) Time**

Many teachers expressed concern over the amount of time required to develop an Individualized Program Plan. The grade 5 math teacher identified the extensive time commitment required for IPP development as a possible limitation to the effectiveness of the IPP:

An IPP, if it's to be effective, requires a lot of sitting down and thinking and we do so much of our work on the fly. Like I've seen other stuff, other paper work, issues where things are done simply to be expedient. Like here's a document that needs to be filled out, once we've got this filled out, we can move onto the next step. And they're often not done thoughtfully. They're done expediently. Basically the paper work becomes the goal as opposed to what the paper work is for. I think that's what could happen with IPPs or it might even be happening now with IPPs. Like let's get the signatures on this document, let's make sure everybody has seen it instead of actually being a tool for the student and the teacher. It becomes obligatory paper work.

The perception that IPPs require a large commitment of time to develop was held by teachers who have not developed or used IPPs previously. One teacher, who currently has students on IPPs but was not involved in their development, reflected on his relation



to the IPP process and expressed relief that he was not involved with IPP development:

Well from what I understand the IPP is an incredibly time intensive endeavour. I know just from teaching twenty-six students that the time it takes just to put things together for them and they're not individual plans, they're group plans, is time consuming. And then the marking that is involved. All the follow-up. You know teaching just takes so much time. So if I was involved in one more thing, it would be the straw that breaks my back.

On the other hand, the school's resource teacher indicated that:

There is two sides to it. One is it is very time consuming. It's not like you can sit down and do it in an hour. It is probably going to take you, oh ..., I don't know, it's very time consuming. On the other hand, because you've spent so much time you get to know those kids so well and you are so planned with those children, do you know what I mean? Like you know what your objectives need to be and you become so focused, then on the other side it's worth your time.

An awareness and concern over the time required for IPPs was also evident at the school board level. As the school board's behavioral consultant explained:

Regular education teachers are over-whelmed. They have a lot of work to do. They have thirty or thirty-five kids in their classroom. Two or three kids that are coded whatever code they may be. There could be a hard of hearing child in the classroom. There might be a behaviour disordered child in the classroom. So they have to remember what to do for all the other kids and then they have these special needs kids. With the kids that are in special education, I think, well not I think but I know, the IPPs are used much more in special ed. then they are in regular ed. just because it is part of the mandate of special ed. and we are used to it as special education teachers. But regular education, they are just way too busy.

Interestingly, although the same theme of time appeared in the special education branch interviews, a different perspective on the issue of time was evident. For instance, one senior administrator at the Special Education Branch commented that:

I don't have a lot of sympathy with the complaint that I get that these things are so time consuming. I am very supportive of teachers and I try to help in my own way to make things easier for them. But regular education teachers have to do year plans and they have to do unit plans and they have to do day plans. And I think maybe

where IPPs become frustrating to teachers is maybe when they are feeling overwhelmed in terms of case loads.

Another provincial administrator expressed concern that "some teachers don't have a clear understanding of the purpose or intent of the IPP. As a result they often put too much information into the IPP in an attempt to comply with IPP guidelines".

## **USE**

### **(8) Limited Use by Generalists**

Many general education teachers indicated that they do not use IPPs and believed that the IPP has little relevance to their classroom activities. A first year teacher expressed a common sentiment when she said "Well, as far as I know the kids go to resource room and then the resource teacher follows the IPP". Another teacher explained why he does not consult his students' IPPs:

The IPP is targeted at the subjects that they have problems with which would be language related and since I teach them math and that's not generally considered language related, consulting it would be a waste of time.

Another teacher with ten years experience suggested that the IPP was not useful to her because her students on IPPs were not experiencing difficulty in her classroom:

Well in my case I suppose it would be a good idea if I actually read it. It may shed some light on what is happening in the classroom although it would probably be something I would go to if I was experiencing difficulty with those students. But as I am not, as they seem to be picking things up at the same rate as everybody else in the class, it's not something I felt compelled to do.

Interestingly, the school principal indicated that she was aware that generalist teachers were not likely using the IPP. She explained:

I am new to the school and I see that maybe I have to provide the opportunity for more IPP use and insist upon it so that a child is not overwhelmed when they go to their regular classroom. So that a teacher who has a student who is on an IPP knows

their IPP and can modify their program so that they meet with success.

The principal went on to explain:

Because they are not using them now. I know they are not. As a matter of fact, I don't know how your tests are going to work out, how your interviews are going to come out, but I'd guess that even teachers that have students who are in IPPs have not read the IPPs of their students.

The school's resource teacher expressed similar concerns over the use of IPPs in the school:

I have always spent time going over the IPP with the teacher. Now if I talk about them needing listening skills, I'm hoping that they are really focusing on that in the classroom as well. The other 50% of the time the students are not here. Whether that is reality or not, that is another issue. In terms of time, in terms of ability, in terms of whether they are even looked at again, I'm not sure.

One of the school board's language arts consultants suggested that there is a great degree of variability in terms of how IPP are used by teachers. She believed that:

Some use it as a daily lesson plan. Some use it as a check-in. Some use it as a means to an end. Some don't use it and then when push comes to shove, first reporting period when they are looking to see what kind of progress has been made, then they are flipping through their IPP and thinking 'oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh'. A lot of teachers, and I have to be honest with you Johanne, do the IPP because it is required and then they shove it in their draw.

### **(9) School Based Supports**

Professionals at all three levels of the educational system suggested that a school environment which supports and encourages IPPs is essential to promoting IPP use. As one school board psychologist explained:

When they get information from other people that it [the IPP] is useful, whether it is another teacher or a principal encouraging its use, that probably would help its use. Somebody referring to it, you know, if it is referred to a lot. Like sort of a culture that talks about the IPP. It is an important educational tool and so any supportive comments on IPPs would help. But I think that it's more like what's going on in your

school. If every class was using the IPP and this was expected, then probably you'd use it if you came from another school and started working there. So it's just part of the culture in some schools.

The school's grade one teacher also felt that working with colleagues on IPP related issue was important. Although she has never worked with IPPs she indicated that:

I would hope that as a staff you would sit down with an IPP form in front of you and go through it step by step and find out what each questions is, what each area means on that form. And then have discussions as a group and get any questions answered at that time that you don't understand.

The third grade teacher voiced a similar idea of school based support when she described her experience of developing and using Individualized Program Plans:

I really found that having the resource teacher there to guide me through it and to discuss things was excellent. So whether it is a resource teacher or an administrator or whoever it is, I think it is a lot easier if there is someone else who is objective, that is not currently working with the child.

A curriculum consultant with the school board believed that teachers sharing their positive IPP experiences with colleagues would be beneficial:

If we could use teachers who were reluctant to use IPPs and who found that after developing them and monitoring and reviewing an IPP with a child really that it helped guide them through the year, it would be really good for teachers to hear their message.

#### **(10) Professional Development**

Many educators expressed concern over the lack of adequate teacher training regarding IPPs and as a result many educators suggested in-servicing and professional development for teachers regarding IPPs would be beneficial. For instance, one provincial administrator commented "that phone call I had from twelve to twelve thirty had something to do with IPPs and people feeling they were not trained and all that. So I think we need to continue to in-service". Similarly, the school's third grade teacher

agreed:

I need some resource teachers, people from downtown to set up sessions for us, to come and explain what it is, to show us what it is, how to use it, how to go about developing it. Maybe we need, you know, even on a principle basis, maybe we need to have something, a requirement of some sort that you know how to use this and how to develop them. I haven't really seen one and I really wouldn't know where to start.

Another teacher described what she believed would help her with feel more comfortable with IPPs:

Maybe some in-servicing about it and people, you know, telling me about it. So I guess in-servicing or just another teacher at this school who could shed some light for beginning teachers or teachers that have never had to deal with an IPP so that they know about it. Because I didn't even know that it was an option, or what it was.

The first grade teacher indicated why she thought there was a need for more training related to IPPs:

You know I think there are a lot of times as a teacher you see things happening but if you don't feel comfortable with it you are going to delay it because you don't think you know what you are doing. So you know, we'll wait another month and see how they are doing and then another month goes by then pretty soon you're getting towards the end and you're just starting your IPP

### Summary of Results from Interviews

In reviewing the results of the interviews with provincial administrators, school board personnel and school based educators, it is clear that participants at all three levels of the educational system have similar perceptions of the functions of the IPP. First, by characterizing the IPP as a document which provides information to help teachers plan activities and classroom experiences for their students with special needs, participants shared the perception the of the Individualized Program Plan as an instructional guide, a document which helps direct teachers' planning. Second, by describing the IPP as

necessary document to account for the changes made to a student's educational program, participants shared the perception of the IPP as tool for accountability purposes.

However, personnel at the school board as well as teachers expressed concern over the accountability function of the IPP, suggesting that a student's progress toward IPP goals and objectives may be used as a measure of teacher effectiveness. Results from interviews also revealed differing perceptions of the role of parents in IPP development. Specifically, provincial administrators described parents as active participants in planning IPPs while school board personnel and school based educators described parents as having a passive role in IPP development. Although acknowledging the need to inform parents of changes to a student's program, professionals at the school board and school level perceived the role of parents to be that of supports for the IPP at home.

In addition, the results of the interviews revealed some differences in the perception of the role of general education teachers in the IPP process. Although discussion with general education teachers indicated that they were not actively involved in IPP development, provincial administrators and school board personnel believed general education teachers should be significant members of the IPP team. However, general education teachers did not perceive themselves as being critical to IPP development. Interestingly, despite their view that they were not key members of the IPP team, a majority of general education teachers voiced a desire to be more involved in the process of generating their student's Individualized Program Plans.

Finally, while participants at the school board and school levels suggested that the time required to develop an IPP was a barrier to the effective development and use of IPPs in the school, on-going professional development related to IPPs as well as the creation of a school culture which promotes IPP use were identified as factors which could promote IPPs with the educational system.

## **Collective Summary of Results**

When viewed collectively, the results of the data collected from provincial and school board documents, questionnaires completed by teachers, and individual interviews with provincial administrators, school board personnel and school based teachers and administrators suggests that there are similar perceptions regarding purpose of IPPs. However, perceptions of IPP development and use varied considerably between provincial, school board and school based educational professionals. First, results from analysis of provincial and school board documents, as well as from questionnaires and interviews suggest that there a basic understanding of the IPP as an instructional guide and as a tool for accountability. However, interviews at the school board and school levels also indicated that many educators were concerned with the accountability functions of the IPP. In addition, provincial documents characterized the IPP as a comprehensive document, a characterization that was not evident at the school board or school levels. The presentation of the IPP as a comprehensive document suggests that administrators at the provincial level may have a broader understanding of the role of the Individualized Program Plan.

Results of the content analysis of documents and interviews also revealed that educational professionals shared a basic understanding of the process of developing an Individualized Program Plan. Interview participants identified the key steps involved in IPP development as: assessment, review of assessment results, meeting with parents and other professionals, planning the IPP, and implementing the IPP. These were the key steps elaborated in provincial and school board documents. However, while results indicate a shared understanding of the process of developing IPPs, the results suggest that there is discrepancy between educators' perceptions of who should be involved in IPP development. For instance, while school board and provincial documents, as well as provincial administrators, presented parents and general education teachers as being

critical to IPP development, school board personnel and school based educators assigned parents a supportive role in IPP development. In other words, parents were not perceived as contributing to the planning of the IPP but rather were perceived as necessary for supporting the IPP at home. In terms of the role of general education teachers, school board personnel perceived the general educator as being important to the IPP process while the majority of teachers perceived the participation of the general education teacher as beneficial to IPP development but did not identify the general educator as being critical to IPP development. However, most general education teachers indicated that they would like to be more involved in IPP development.

When viewed collectively, the results on IPP use suggest that there is considerable discrepancy between perceptions of how IPPs should be used. For instance, while results at the provincial and school board levels suggested that teachers should use IPPs to plan instructional activities, to communicate with parents, and to monitor student progress, results from the school indicate teachers did not believe that the IPP should be used for communication or monitoring of student progress. The majority of general education teachers believed the IPP should be used to gather information about a student's needs in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of the learner and to assist in selecting classroom tasks for the student.

Furthermore, results of this study suggested that two factors influence IPP development and use. First, time required to develop an IPP was perceived as being a barrier to teacher's involvement with the document. Second, several participants suggested that that lack of preparation related to IPPs would impact on teacher's ability to effectively develop and use IPPs. Finally, results of the study also indicated that professional development and school culture are factors which influence the use of IPPs.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to explore educators' perceptions regarding the purpose, development, and use of IPPs, and (b) to identify factors which may hinder or promote IPP development and use in school. The major findings of this study were as follows:

1. Educators share a common understanding of the IPP as both an instructional guide and a tool for accountability.
2. Teachers assigned more functions to the IPP than educators at other levels of the educational system.
3. Educators at the school board and school levels believed parents should have a passive role in the IPP process; provincial administrators perceived parents as active participants in IPP development.
4. Provincial administrators and school board personnel believed general education teachers to be key participants in the IPP process; general education teachers did not perceive themselves as being critical to the creation of IPPs.
5. Teachers do not use IPPs on a regular basis as an instructional guide.
6. The most common use for IPPs is as a source of information about students' academic needs.
7. Educators have limited preparation to work with IPPs.
8. Some teachers want training in the areas of IPP development and use.
9. Time required to develop IPPs was perceived as a potential barrier to the effectiveness of IPPs.
10. A school culture which encourages and promotes IPPs was perceived as a way of enhancing IPP use.

The following sections discuss these findings in light of the empirical foundations and with respect to the implications for the practical application of IPPs in the school system.

### *Role of the IPP*

A review of the literature on individualized plans suggested a degree of conceptual confusion regarding the influence of individualized plans on classroom activities. For instance, researchers have advocated using IPPs as an instructional guide for planning educational activities (Smith, Slattery, & Knopp, 1993; Ortiz & Wilkinson), a curriculum for students with special needs (Lieberman, 1995), or as a daily lesson plan (Lynch & Beare, 1990; Dudley-Marling, 1985). In their discussions of the relationship between classroom activities and individualized plans, researchers have consistently assigned only one function to the IPP, either an instructional guide, or a curriculum or a daily lesson plan. Results from this study indicate that teachers conceive of the IPP as a multi-function document, perceiving its functions to include instructional guide, curriculum, and daily plan as well as having administrative and accountability functions. However this finding may be due to the different methodologies used to discover this information in previous studies.

While the perception of the IPP as a multi-purpose document likely indicates that the IPP has a more complex relationship to classroom practice than originally envisioned by researcher, it is imperative that the relationship between classroom activities and IPPs be clarified since the functions teachers associated with the IPP appear to be contradictory in nature. For example, the concept of an IPP as a guide to instruction implies a document which summarizes in general terms the areas or skills to be emphasized during the year. A curriculum, on the other hand, suggests a document which specifies the content of instruction in a given domain while a daily lesson plan implies a document which provides

detailed description of the instructional activities for a specific day. Given the differences in the detail and specificity required for each type of document, it is unclear how an IPP can function both as a summary of annual goals as well as a detailed lesson plan.

A second issue which needs to be clarified regarding the role of Individualized Program Plans is the perception of the accountability function of the IPP. While participants at all levels of the educational system acknowledge that the IPP is needed to justify and explain changes made to a student's educational program, professionals at the school board and school levels suggested that the Individualized Program Plan might be used to hold teachers responsible for the progress of students. In other words, teachers feared possible repercussions if a student did not achieve the goals and objectives specified in the IPP. Although a review of both the provincial and school board documents clearly indicates that the IPP is not a legal contract nor is it "a tool to monitor the effectiveness of teachers (Alberta Education, 1995), the perception that the IPP could be used to judge the effectiveness of teachers needs to be further explored and addressed. First, if teachers feel that the IPP exists to evaluate their work, it will likely lead to increased anxiety over the IPP and may possibly establish a negative environment for IPP development and use. Furthermore, if teachers feel that the IPP is a tool to evaluate their effectiveness, teachers may want to minimize their involvement with IPPs so that they will not be held responsible for how much a student learns.

### *Parental Involvement*

The majority of teachers and school board personnel interviewed believed that parents should not be active participants in planning their children's individualized programs. Parents were described as 'supports' for the IPP at home. Participants at the school and board levels described parents as important sources of information about their child and necessary to help reinforce IPP goals and objectives at home, but parents were

not perceived as having a role to play in planning goal and objectives. This perception of parental involvement in IPP development is highly consistent with previous research on teachers' perception of parental involvement in IPP development (Gerber, Banbury, Miller & Griffin, 1986; Giliam & Coleman, 1981) and strongly supports the conclusion of Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman & Maxwell (1978) who stated that "teachers do not feel that it is appropriate for parents to have a role in developing the student's plan, judging program alternatives, or making final decision" (p.533) .

However, unlike the perceptions of teachers and school board personnel, professionals at the provincial and school board levels believed parents should be active participants in planning IPPs. For example, although acknowledging that parental involvement will vary according to the needs of the parents, provincial administrators portrayed parents as active members of the decision making process. Parents were often described as 'partners' in the process of developing IPPs and were responsible for taking an active role in selecting and designing IPPs.

Several issues make it imperative that the field assist teachers in including parents in IPP development. First, teacher beliefs about the nature of parental involvement will likely influence their interactions and experiences with parents during the IPP process. Second, studies indicate that parents who are actively involved in IPP development have a high level of satisfaction regarding programming and placement decisions and express positive attitudes towards the children's teachers and schools (Abrahamson, Yoshida & Haggerty, 1983; Margolis, Brannigan & Kearing, 1981). Third, by minimizing the input that parents have in IPP development, educators may be missing important opportunities to develop consistency in a student's educational program since parents are likely be involved with their child's education every year. Parents can provide information about their long-term plans or goals for the student as well as provide details of how previous teachers worked with their child. Therefore minimizing the involvement of parents in the

IPP process increases the possibility that the IPP will reflect the immediate concerns or perspectives of the educator who designs the IPP, an individual who will change frequently throughout a student's educational career.

### *General Educator Involvement*

In the research on IPP development, a major focus has been the role of general education teachers to the process of developing and using individualized plans. Researchers have argued that involvement of the regular classroom teacher in planning individualized programs results in a more comprehensive understanding of a student's strengths and needs, the creation of a document which is relevant to general education teachers (Bauwens & Korinek, 1993) and increased opportunities for teachers to support each others' instructional activities (Pugach, 1982).

Teachers' responses to the questionnaire on IPP use as well as results from their interviews indicated that few general education teachers were involved in developing individualized plans for their students. Instead, the majority of teachers reported that their students' individualized plans had been developed by the school's resource teacher. When involved in the process of developing IPPs, the regular classroom teachers reported that their involvement consisted of describing a student's current educational performance or providing information about classroom activities, trends which were consistent with Pugach (1982), Nevin, McCann, & Semmel (1983) and Ysseldyke, Algozzine & Allen's (1982) research on regular education involvement in IPP development.

Teachers' perceptions of the IPP as a special education document may account for their limited involvement in IPP development. Most teachers interviewed suggested that IPP development was the responsibility of the school's special education teacher and described the IPP as being useful to the school's resource teacher. Teachers' perception that an individualized plan is developed and used by special education teachers was

consistent with Smith, Slattery & Knopp's (1993) conclusion that the individualized plan is perceived as a "document that is prepared by individuals who are not involved in the daily learning activities of the child" (p.2). In addition, Banbury (1987), Morgan & Rhode (1983) and Nadler & Shore (1980) have examined teachers perceptions of individualized plans and have reported that the individualized plans are perceived as being the responsibility of special education teachers.

Interestingly, despite their perceptions that they were not critical to IPP development, a majority of teachers interviewed believed that they could contribute to IPP development and expressed a desire to be more involved in developing IPPs for their students. Moreover, the two school board psychologists also wanted to have a more active role in consulting with teachers concerning individualized plans for learners with special needs. While previous research has not examined the role of non-teaching professionals in IPP development, the desire for more involvement in IPP development expressed by teachers in this study challenges the conclusions of researchers who have suggested that IPP development is perceived as an administrative task, something which needs to be completed in order to comply with mandated requirements (Morgan, 1981; Dudley-Marling, 1985; Margolis & Truesdall, 1989). In their study of teachers's attitudes toward individualized plans, Morgan & Rhode (1983) reported that teachers perceived individualized plans as time-consuming clerical tasks. Like the teachers in Morgan & Rhode's study, teachers in this study also reported that IPP development was a time consuming activity. Therefore, given that teachers were aware of the time commitment necessary to develop IPPs and nonetheless desired to become involved in the process of creating their students' IPPs, this result suggests that IPP process is perceived as being beneficial.

The limited involvement of general education teachers in IPP development in this study undermines the intent of collaborative development inherent in Alberta Education

guidelines. Furthermore, from a practical point of view, the lack of general educator involvement in IPP development raises questions about the effectiveness of the educational program being supplied to students with special needs (Strickland & Brantley, 1982). Since general education teachers work with students in the regular classroom environment, they may develop an understanding of a student which differs from that of the special education teacher. Thus limiting their involvement results in missed opportunities for the special education teacher to gain important information about the student which could assist in designing and implementing the IPP. In addition, a restricted role for general education teachers hinders the generalist from developing a comprehensive understanding of students needs as well as their educational programs.

In addition to their limited involvement in the IPP process, results from this study indicated that while IPPs were used extensively by the school's resource teacher, most generalists did not use the IPP to design instructional activities for their students with special needs. These results were consistent with previous research on IPP use which indicated that teachers do not use IPPs to plan instruction (Pugach, 1982; Nevin, McCann & Semmel, 1983; Dudley-Marling, 1985; Lynch & Beare, 1990) and were consistent with Stowitschek & Kelso's (1989) conclusion that individualized plans are "not meeting initial expectations in the guidance of instructional efforts" (p.139).

Several factors may influence teachers' use of individualized plans. First, many teachers in the study expressed uncertainty as to how the IPP related to the regular school program and the general curriculum requirements followed by most students. Teachers' uncertainty over the relationship between of the IPP to classroom activities supports the results of the questionnaire in which teachers perceived the IPP to be an instructional guide, a curriculum, and a daily plan. Second, use of IPPs by general education teachers may have been influenced by the fact that classroom teachers were not involved in developing the individualized plans. As a result, the regular education teachers in this

study had no personal commitment to the IPP and thus may have been less inclined to use the IPP, an interpretation which supports Margolis & Truesdale's (1987) suggestion that limited general educator involvement in the IPP process results in decreased commitment and motivation to implement the individualized plan.

Epstein, Patton, Polloway & Foley (1992) have suggested that the limited use of IPPs by general education teachers in planning instructional activities calls into question the IPPs basic contribution to the development of appropriate interventions for students with special needs. While research indicates that special education teachers use individualized plans for planning purposes, the minimal use of IPPs by general education teachers suggests that when in the regular classroom, students with special needs may not be receiving instructional activities which will assist them in achieving their IPP goals and objectives. Therefore, as a consequence of not using the IPP to plan instructional activities, regular education teachers may be restricting opportunities for students to progress toward IPP goals and objectives.

#### *Monitoring and Communication Functions*

In addition to previously cited concerns regarding the limited instructional utility of the IPP, results of this study raise concerns regarding the communication and monitoring functions of the IPP. A review of provincial and school board documents clearly indicated that one of the roles of the IPP was to supervise student progress and to allow the IPP team to adjust IPP goals according to student needs. School based educators also suggested that IPPs need to be reviewed and adapted to meet the changing needs of students. However, results of the questionnaires completed by teachers indicated that half of teachers surveyed rarely or never used an IPP to monitor a student's progress. Although research has not previously examined how individualized plans are used to monitor student progress, the apparent limited use of IPPs to monitor student progress



needs to be clarified. Since students are expected to work towards completing the goals and objectives indicated on the IPP, their progress toward IPP goals and objectives needs to be reviewed and evaluated in order to ensure that IPP goals and objectives remain appropriate for students.

Another issue which needs to be clarified regarding the IPP is its use as a tool to facilitate communication. Whereas provincial and school board documents described the IPP as a tool to facilitate discussion of a student's program and to provide opportunities for parents and professionals to share information regarding a student, a majority of teachers surveyed indicated that IPPs were used to consult with professionals regarding a student but were not used to consult with parents. These results would appear to suggest that the IPP is useful to facilitate communication among professionals but is of limited utility as a communication tool between education professionals and parents. Although the limited use of IPPs to consult with parents may be a reflection of teacher attitudes toward parental involvement in the IPP process, the results may also indicate that the IPP document is not an adequate tool to structure consultation with parents. Therefore, more research is needed to explore the communicative functions of individualized plans.

### *Professional Development*

Educators' lack of training related to IPPs may account for both teachers' perceptions that they are not critical to IPP development as well as their limited use of IPPs. Less than one fifth of education professionals in this study had pre-service or in-service training related to Individualized Program Plans. While research on teacher preparation has indicated that pre-service teachers receive little information on individualizing instruction for students with special needs (Epstein, Patton, Polloway & Foley, 1992; Howell, 1985; Pray, Hall & Markley, 1992; Askamit, 1990), the lack of in-service training for professionals at all levels of the educational system was surprising.

The lack of professional preparation at both the pre-service and in-service levels could have considerable influence on the quality of educational programs provided to students with special needs; according to Smith, Slattery & Knopp (1993), an individualized plan "is the vehicle for developing appropriate programming and providing a framework for implementation" (p.1). Educators who fail to use individualized plans effectively may be limiting the learning opportunities of students on IPPs. Given the movement towards inclusive education, all teachers are likely to be involved with IPPs during their teaching careers. Therefore, it will be critical for all teachers to have knowledge of IPPs and feel comfortable with the process of developing and using IPPs.

In the research on individualized plans, strategies to increase teachers' knowledge and skills related to IPPs have traditionally focused on pre-service training (Aksamit, 1990; Lynch & Beare, 1990) or on-going professional development (Tymitz, 1980; Fender & Fiedler, 1990). While education professionals in this study also suggested that pre-service and in-service training on IPPs is needed to ensure that teachers develop the knowledge and skills necessary to develop and utilize individual plans, teachers believed that learning about IPPs from their colleagues in the school would be a beneficial way of learning about IPPs, a view that was supported by school board personnel who believed that using teachers experienced with IPPs to provide training and support to their colleagues would be beneficial. Therefore, the development and use of school based in-services on IPPs which are conducted by teachers experienced with IPPs, should be explored as an alternative method of providing professionals with training on IPPs.

Despite acknowledging the need for more training related to IPPs, teachers and school board personnel also suggested that individual training would not be sufficient to increase IPP use in the school. In order to improve IPP use by general education teachers, participants at the school and school board levels suggested that a school environment which promotes and encourages IPP use needs to be developed. Furthermore, the school

administrator was perceived as being critical to promoting and encouraging IPP use. While research on IPPs has not examined the influence of school culture on IPP development and use nor the role of school administrators in supporting the IPP process, Portigal (1995) concluded that school culture and in particular school administrators were critical factors in the successful implementation of school-based decision teams. Given that the IPP process represents a collaborative effort to arrive at decisions regarding a student's educational program, it is possible that school culture and the attitudes and abilities of school administrators influence the IPP process. Further research is needed to clarify this point.

### **Limitations of the Findings**

This study focused on the perceptions of educational professionals regarding the purpose, development and use of Individualized Program Plans. However, the results of the study must be interpreted in light of several limitations of the study. First, only a small number of participants were interviewed at each level of educational system. In particular, the limited number of participants at the provincial and school board levels should be noted. Second, in order to improve the reliability of the findings, interview transcripts were sent to all participants and the results of questionnaires were sent to teachers at the school. However the use of a second reviewer, to ensure that more than one person agreed on the interpretation of data, would have added to the study. Third, there was limited opportunity for the researcher to observe the development and use of IPPs at the school level. Therefore, the study relied heavily on teachers self-reports. Teachers may have answered questions in the way they thought the researcher wanted them to respond. Fourth, the researcher did not have control over selecting a school but rather was provided with the names of six schools which could be contacted within the school board's jurisdiction. Finally, interviews at the school board and school levels were

conducted over a period of several weeks. Therefore, participants had opportunities to discuss the study among themselves, which may have influenced their responses or perceptions of the Individualized Program Plan.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

Several delimitations of this study should be noted. First, the focus of the study was on examining educators' understanding of the role of Individualized Program Plans as well as their perceptions of the process of developing and using IPPs. The perceptions of parents and students were not examined in this study. Second, this study focused on the perceptions of teachers who work with students with mild to moderate disabilities. Students with severe disabilities also require Individualized Program Plans therefore the inclusion of educators who work with students with severe disabilities would have enriched the study by providing a more comprehensive description of educators' perceptions of the IPP across a wider range of disabilities. Finally, this study did not include an examination of students Individualized Program Plans. An examination of student IPPs could have contributed to the study by allowing the opportunity to examine how educators' perceptions of the IPP influence the actual contents of the Individualized Program Plan.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The results of this study along with findings from previous studies suggest several areas for future research on Individualized Program Plans. The first priority for research on individualized plans is to determine if the development and use of individualized plans actually makes a qualitative difference in the educational experiences of students with special needs. Although the concept of individualized plans was introduced in the mid 1970's and was a general feature of special education services by the early 1980's

(Goodman & Bond, 1993; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 1981), there appears to be no published research on the impact of individualized plans on the quality of education provided to exceptional learners. Therefore, as indicated by Morgan & Rhode (1983), "much more information and knowledge should be acquired concerning the impact of IEP's on handicapped students" (p.66).

Beyond survey research on regular and special education teachers involvement in developing IPPs, little is known about the role of school administrators and other non-teaching professionals in IPP development. This study has suggested that a variety of education professionals would like to be involved with the IPP process. More research is needed which examines the role that non-teaching professionals may have in supporting IPP development. Furthermore, since it is the intent of Alberta Education that the IPP is developed collaboratively, more research is needed which explores the process of developing an IPP. Researchers need to understand the perceptions of parents and students regarding involvement in IPPs and identify potential barriers to the collaborative development of the Individualized Program Plan.

Furthermore, the research agenda for individualized plans should be expanded to include an examination of the role of the IPP as well as the process of development and use at the senior high school level. To date, most research on IPPs has involved participants at the elementary and junior high school levels. Therefore, it is important for researchers to understand the role of the IPP in helping students with individualized plans make successful transitions to post-secondary environments.

Finally, more research is needed which examines how school culture influences teacher perceptions of IPPs as well as the process of developing and using the documents. Efforts to increase teachers' use of individualized plans have centred on individual teacher training both at the pre-service and in-service levels. While efforts to determine how to provide teachers with training which will allow them to develop and use IPPs effectively

should continue, results of this study suggest that the dynamics of the school environment may impact IPP development and use.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the perceptions of education professionals is critical to help us further our knowledge of Individualized Program Plans and the conceptual barriers which may interfere with their development and use. While this study has shown that there is a shared understanding of some aspects of IPP development and use among educators, the results also indicate that educators at the various levels of the educational system have differing beliefs about key features of the IPP process. All participants in this study had a genuine commitment to improving the educational experiences of students with special needs. However, the presence of differing beliefs and perspectives regarding the Individualized Program Plan creates the potential for misunderstanding, anxiety, and confusion among education professionals, a situation which can only have a detrimental effect on the education of students.

The ultimate goal of the Individualized Program Plan is to help educators deal effectively with individual differences. As such, both the process of developing an IPP as well as the document itself are importance features of providing appropriate educational services to students with special needs. First, the process of developing an IPP reinforces the notion of shared responsibility for meeting the educational needs of students with special needs. As observed by Smith, Slattery & Knopp (1993), through the concept of shared responsibility, IPP "participants can become owners of a process that fosters increased participation in a decision-making team and provides essential ecological information" (p.4). Second, the process of developing an IPP can focus on the development of long-term plans for achieving desired outcomes. The IPP, once developed, essentially becomes the educational roadmap to the successful development of

the desired long-term goals for the student. Finally, once developed the Individualized Program Plan becomes a valuable resource to teachers in providing direction and structure to a student's educational program while still permitting teachers the flexibility needed to design and implement appropriate instructional activities.

Given the importance of the Individualized Program Plan to the educational needs of exceptional learners, it is imperative for researchers to continue to explore issues related to IPPs. Furthermore, as the results of this study have suggested that differing perceptions of the purpose, development and use of IPPs exist among provincial administrators, school board personnel and school based educators, there is a critical need for education professionals to examine the divergence in their perceptions of the IPP and to establish more clarity and agreement on the development and use of IPPs. In conclusion, as noted by Dudley-Marling (1985), unless the Individualized Program Plan makes a qualitative difference in the education of students with special needs, it is probably not worth the effort.

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## Interview Guide

### Background History

1. Tell me about the type of work and involvement you have had with children and adolescents.
2. Tell me about your educational background.
- 3a) What kind of preparation have you had in relation to IPPs ?

### Details of Current Experiences

1. What is your current position ? How long have you been in this position ? What was your previous position/occupation ?
2. Tell me about your current activities and responsibilities. Please describe in as much detail as possible your current involvement and experiences with IPPs?
3. Describe for me in as much detail as you can the process of developing an IPP as you understand it.
4. How do you (as an administrator, psychologist, teacher etc) relate to this process?  
Reconstruct for me the details of your involvement in the development process.
5. What is the experience of being involved in developing an IPP like for you ?
6. You have described the development of an IPP as (summary of respondents key points). What factors do you think influence how IPP are developed ?
7. How are you involved with an IPP once it has been developed? Describe what you (as the principal, a teacher, psychologist, etc) do with a completed IPP ?
8. What is the experience of using an IPP like for you ?
9. What factors do you think promote/hinder IPP use in the schools ?

### Reflect on Meaning

1. Tell me what an IPP means to you.
2. What role or roles do you think the IPP should have in the educational system?
3. What do you think is the next step or level for the IPP ?

As part of a case study on IPPs, educators in your school are being asked to fill out the questionnaire below. Your answers will help us understand how IPPs are currently being perceived and used in schools.

1) Are you male or female ?    ☐ Male                      ☐ Female

2) How long have you been teaching ?

☐ < than 1 year    ☐ 1 to 3 years    ☐ 4 to 10 years    ☐ 11 to 20 years    ☐ > than 20 years

3) Approximately how many of your current students have IPPs ?                      \_\_\_\_\_

4) Approximately how many students with IPPs have you taught in your career ? \_\_\_\_\_

After each of the following sentences, please mark the box that best represents your behaviour and/or thoughts regarding the item.

	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
5. I use IPP goals and objectives to plan classroom instruction.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I use IPPs to consult with parents and guardians.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I use IPPs to get information about a student's social and emotional needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I use IPPs to evaluate a student's progress.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I use IPPs to make recommendations regarding changes to a student's educational program.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I use IPPs to consult with other teachers and professionals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
11. I use IPPs to get information about a student's academic needs.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
12. I use IPPs to get information about a student's career interests.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
13. I use IPPs to record information about a student's progress toward IPP goals and objectives.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]

	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Undecided	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree
14. An IPP provides me with an understanding of a student's strengths.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
15. An IPP provides me with an understanding of a student's areas of difficulty.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
16. I could teach just as effectively without having an IPP.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
17. An IPP provides me with an understanding of how to teach a student.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
18. An IPP improves the quality of education provided to students with special needs.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]
19. The time spent developing an IPP justifies its worth.	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]	[   ]

20. The IPP is : (please check as many items as are applicable)

- ☐ a curriculum for students with special needs
- ☐ a daily plan
- ☐ a legal contract
- ☐ a report card to evaluate student progress
- ☐ a summary of current goals and objectives
- ☐ a summary of annual goals and objectives
- ☐ a tool to monitor the effectiveness of teachers
- ☐ a working document
- ☐ an administrative document
- ☐ an instructional guide
- ☐ other: please specify \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.



**Coding Sheet: Themes and Issues in Data Sources**

Date of Coding: \_\_\_\_\_

Time to Code: \_\_\_\_\_

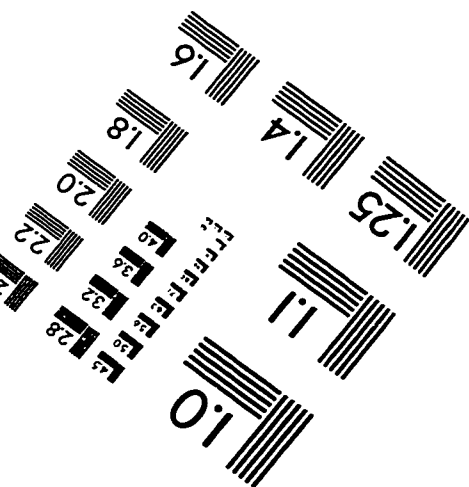
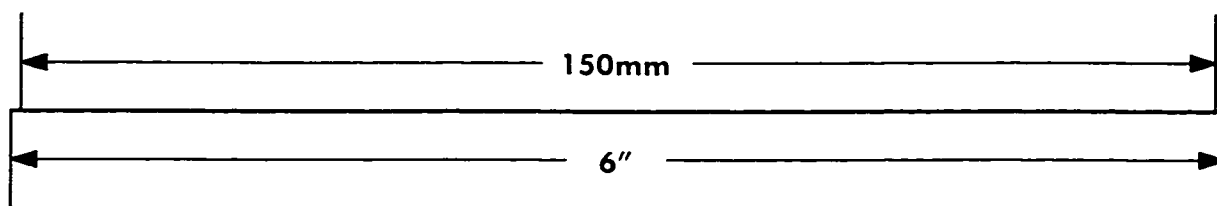
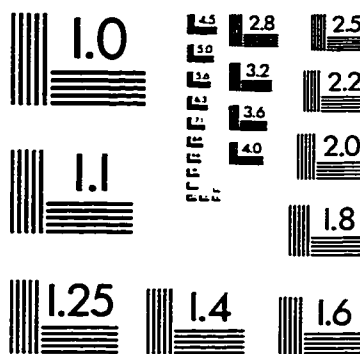
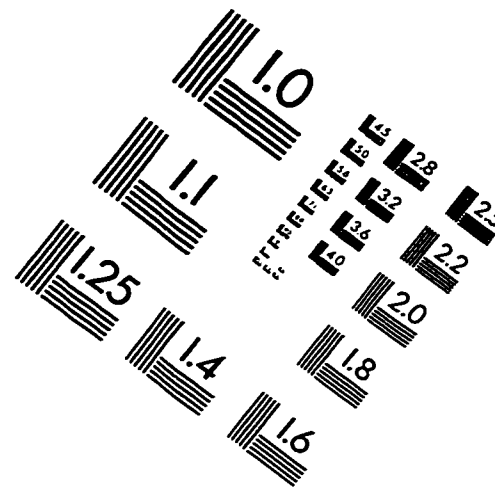
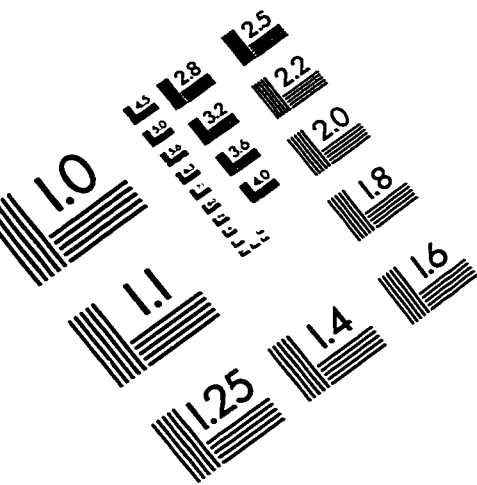
Source: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Total number of themes &amp; issues: \_\_\_\_\_

THEMES	FREQUENCY

Comments & Observations:

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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