Developing a Whole School Approach to Including Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders in a Mainstream Primary School

The process of including children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms is an ongoing issue for practising teachers. In this article the author explores an approach which engages all of the stakeholders in the process of inclusion while attempting to address the individual needs of a pupil on the autistic spectrum.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of educational provision in Ireland, it is now a well-established expectation that students with special educational needs (SEN) should be able to learn alongside their peers in mainstream settings. I am referring, of course, to the concept of 'inclusion'. Recent legislation promotes and increasingly requires that inclusion be seen as a normative practice, not merely an option and as such has settled the 'why include?' debate (Ireland, 1998; Ireland, 2004). Research, meanwhile, is more concerned with addressing the question 'how to include?' It has highlighted many important issues for those seeking to successfully implement inclusion strategies (Day, 2005; Reilly and Senior, 2007; White, 2007; Fennell, 2008). This article considers this issue of how to develop a whole-school approach which promotes, guides and ensures the successful practice of including children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) in mainstream classes.

CONTEXT

The Report of the Task Force on Autism commissioned by the Department of Education and Science (DES) (2001) states that:

> Inclusion ideally promotes the same opportunity for education, rights and responsibilities for all, in a barrier-free system, where parents, pupils, and school staff collaborate and reflect the diverse nature of persons in a community (p. 121).

Planning for inclusion should, therefore, involve the support and commitment of everyone connected with a school (i.e. the whole school community). Including pupils with SEN in mainstream settings is an extremely valuable and yet highly challenging goal. Without the level of commitment described above, the 'ideal' of achieving a positive and successful approach to inclusion is made more difficult, if not impossible.

In this instance the 'whole school' being referred to is a primary school in the Dublin area with approximately 430 pupils (in sixteen mainstream classes and two 'outreach' classes for children with ASDs). It is important to mention that the school, under the patronage of

Educate Together, has an inclusive ethos which is intrinsic to the philosophy of such schools; child-centred, democratic, co-educational and multi-denominational. Working within this framework means that the idea of including children from the outreach classes in mainstream has never really been questioned. More important, however, is the question of how best to implement the inclusion process so that it is beneficial and positive for everyone involved.

Before describing the steps undertaken to achieve inclusion and subsequently formulate a whole-school policy for same, it is important to mention that pupils from the outreach classes had already participated in mainstream settings within the school. However, this had tended to be done when circumstances were favourable (i.e. the time seemed right, there were appropriate activities taking place or a teacher from mainstream had offered). Though everyone was committed, the process was not perhaps as successful as it might have been if carried out in a more systematic way. While considering how best to develop a process for including pupils with ASD, the school was approached by a doctoral student* who was researching inclusive practices in the Irish context. From this initial contact a mutually beneficial partnership was established whereby the researcher, staff and parents worked together to adapt and implement an inclusive practice programme for children with ASD initially developed in the United States of America (De Boer-Ott, 1997).

DEVELOPING THE INCLUSION PROCESS

During the development of the inclusion process described here, continuous reference was made to the materials and information provided in the original programme developed by De Boer-Ott (1997). The end result formed the basis for what is described below. A similarly adapted version of this programme has recently been sanctioned by the DES (McCann, De Boer-Ott and Honan, 2006).

Step 1: Assembling the Team
The process began with identifying a child for whom inclusion in a mainstream class would be an appropriate goal. The outreach class teacher (i.e. special education teacher) was responsible for making this initial decision because of his knowledge and understanding of each of the pupils with ASD. Having identified the child, the following meetings/discussions took place for the purpose of gaining clarity on issues and gathering relevant information.

Meeting with parents: Before a decision to include was made, parents' opinions and more importantly, their feelings about their child being included, were sought. This collaborative approach to inclusion gave the parents the opportunity to feel involved in the process from the outset.

Meeting of the 'team' already in place: The outreach teacher, special needs assistants (SNAs) and the school principal met to introduce the inclusion process.

Identifying the mainstream placement and teacher: Before the teacher/class was selected, the following issues were considered:
- The age of the mainstream peers (to be as close as possible to the pupil being included)
- The experience and attitude of the mainstream teacher
- The size (as small as possible) and stability (no major changes foreseen) of the mainstream class
- Any other children with special educational needs in the class
- The class dynamic (behaviour issues etc.).

Identifying a relatively small, calm, co-operative class of similarly aged peers, with little chance of any major changes occurring during the year, and an experienced and supportive teacher is not always a realisable goal. Seeing this type of class as a target, and making all reasonable attempts to reach it, was. Seeking to achieve the latter is an essential step towards creating "the least restrictive and most normalised setting" within which the pupil with ASD will receive their education (DES, 2001, p. 121).

Reviewing and clarifying what is meant by the term 'inclusion': Jones (2002) makes the point that "there have been many definitions of integration…and debate on how inclusion differs from integration" (p. 39). Becoming conversant with these different definitions and with the subtleties of the 'integration versus inclusion' debate was vital in helping the team to understand what they were aiming to achieve when including a pupil with ASD in a mainstream class. In seeking to create the least restrictive environment it became apparent that inclusion would require the school to also make accommodations and modifications to the content, delivery and organisation of the curriculum rather than expecting the pupil with ASD to fit into existing routines and structures (DES, 2001; Jones, 2002).

Agreeing the benefits of inclusion: Given the particular difficulties of a pupil with ASD (i.e. those associated with social communication, social interaction and rigid patterns of thinking), the potential benefits of being involved in a mainstream setting were substantial and needed to be agreed. These included, the opportunity to learn appropriate social responses, to develop play and communication skills, to learn to cope and work in a typical classroom setting and to develop friendships. The potential benefits for the child's peers, his/ her teacher and family were also considered (De Boer-Ott, 1997).

Agreeing the roles and responsibilities of the team: In a whole-school approach to inclusion everyone has a role and a set of responsibilities. De Boer-Ott's (1997) list of these roles and responsibilities emphasises the crucial duties of an 'inclusion facilitator' and an 'inclusion administrator'. In this instance the former position was taken by the outreach class teacher and the latter by the principal. The main role of the facilitator is to instigate the inclusion process and to supervise as it continues. Having someone designated to do this will ensure that momentum is maintained and that potential challenges are identified and dealt with as effectively as possible. While the facilitator sets the day-to-day pace of the process, the administrator creates and maintains the environment that will allow inclusion to develop as positively as possible within the

whole-school context. The importance of this support and commitment to the idea of inclusion cannot be underestimated.

Step 2: Preparing for Inclusion
With the 'team' in place, a meeting was arranged in which a profile of the pupil was presented, discussed and agreed upon. The child's strengths and current and potential needs were shared along with behaviour issues and concerns. In addition, it was agreed that the following opportunities should be facilitated before the pupil was introduced to the mainstream class:

- the mainstream teacher to observe and interact with the pupil with ASD
- the special needs teacher to observe the mainstream class
- reverse-mainstreaming (or integration) by peers.

The first of these measures allows the mainstream teacher to reconcile existing information about the child with what they observe directly. It may also raise other questions for the teacher and allow him/ her to begin establishing a relationship with the pupil. Observing in the mainstream class is necessary in order to identify modifications and accommodations that may be required for inclusion to be as smooth and successful as possible. Note may be taken of existing layout and class routines and teacher-pupil interactions and activities that offer opportunities for early inclusion. The final measure refers to the practice whereby mainstream peers spend time in the outreach class (or a comparable, familiar setting) with the pupil with ASD in order to establish a relationship (Christie and Fidler, 2001 cited in Jones, 2002). This is helpful in enabling the latter's social inclusion to be relatively natural and unproblematic when the time comes for them to take that important step. The peers required preparation for this process of reverse-integration and this took place as part of the next stage of the process.

Step 3: Meetings and Training
Having planned for and carried out the preparatory measures described above, the principal and outreach class/special education teacher met again with the parents to:

- introduce the school team
- discuss the class identified for inclusion
- obtain their input on the strengths and needs of the child
- address any further questions they may have had.

Although they had been involved in the initial 'team meeting' (step 1), it was appropriate to meet with the SNAs again, in order to outline the inclusion plan and update them on key issues. Time was allowed for review of their role and responsibilities while in the mainstream class and for them to raise any issues they might have had about the process. As previously mentioned, social interaction skills training was given to the mainstream pupils in order to better prepare them to interact with the pupil with ASD during the reverse-integration activities. Four key skills were identified and worked on: getting the child's attention, encouraging him in turn-taking, praising appropriate social behaviour and encouraging conversation with him (Pierce and Schreibman, 1997).

The process of reverse integration lasted for a number of weeks. The emphasis was on social interaction and communication (using board games) rather than on formal academic activities as these were the areas of greatest need for the child with ASD. Having taken time to do this the child with ASD was familiar and comfortable with a significant number of his peers (and they with him) before being included in the mainstream class. The final meeting involving the whole team (staff and parents) included a review of all previous and any new information concerning the child, his autism, probable classroom accommodations and types of support to be given before inclusion commenced.

Step 4: Inclusion into the Mainstream Classroom
When the time was right (i.e. the child with ASD was interacting positively and happily with his peers) inclusion in the mainstream class began; at first, once or twice a week, for about thirty minutes. Social activities, similar to those carried out during reverse integration, were used. In this new context, everything was kept as familiar as possible. The team agreed that it would be better in these early stages to include the child for too little time, rather than too much. This was done in order to ensure each session ended while all was going well, rather than when it was beginning to become too demanding or stressful.

Gradually, the time spent in the mainstream class and the range and type of activities used as vehicles for inclusion, increased. This development occurred as a result of regular discussions and planning between the mainstream and outreach teachers, and as part of ongoing observation.

Step 5: Ongoing Observation and Facilitation
Ongoing observation is important in ensuring successful inclusion. It encourages and emphasises reflection and analysis which lead, in turn, to better practice. It also provides an effective and thorough form of continuous assessment of the child and the progress he or she is making (Jordan and Powell, 1995; Jones, 2002; Lordan, 2002). During the development of this inclusion process, close observation was carried out by both mainstream and outreach staff. Information was recorded using forms adapted from De Boer-Ott's programme (1997). Typical questions that arose were: How is the pupil coping? What activities are working well? In what future activities can he be included? What should the social versus academic emphasis be, bearing in mind the needs of the child? How is he handling classroom transitions? How positive are interactions between the pupil and his peers/teacher? To whom is he looking for support? Are the peers ever trying too hard? Answers to questions such as these led to the adaptation of some strategies and approaches.

On-going facilitation was provided on issues relating to education of a pupil with ASD in a less structured environment. This is one of the main responsibilities of the special education teacher (the inclusion facilitator) and, in this case, included:

- preparing the pupil for each inclusion

- working on generalising acquired skills in different contexts
- demonstrating how to teach new skills in mainstream by using techniques that have been successful in the special education setting
- advising on how to continue making adaptations (as needed and including input on social interactions and behaviour management).

Progress was monitored and maintained throughout the remainder of the school year and culminated in the pupil's transition to the new school year.

Step 6: Transitioning to the New School Year
In this case, the mainstream teacher took her class for a second year which meant that transitioning to the new school session was straightforward. Inclusion is now a major part of the pupil's education and this will be reflected in relevant goals being incorporated into his individual education plan (IEP). In the likely event of a new teacher being assigned to the class, it was agreed this appointment should be decided upon as soon as possible. Once decided, time would be available for the new teacher to observe the pupil with ASD in both mainstream and outreach classrooms. Ideally, time would also be given to facilitate training and input from the special education teacher on issues pertinent to autism. Finally, it was decided that an end-of-year team meeting is important when reviewing progress and setting goals for the coming session.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS

It has been three years since the process, outlined above, was developed and first implemented. The pupil who was taken through this programme continues to be included in the same mainstream class while also spending time in the outreach class. The amount of time he is included continues to increase, and if it is appropriate, he will eventually be fully included in mainstream. Other pupils with ASD have also been included, their individual education needs having determined the rate and extent of their inclusion. Once the 'pilot' programme had been run staff and parent representatives, from the wider school community, were invited to develop a policy for inclusion. The lessons learned from the initial programme were shared and used to inform policy decisions. The policy was also widened beyond the scope of children from the outreach classes to include all children with SEN. It was then presented to the school community for comment and approval. Through such a process, inclusion is now a 'whole-school' concern.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Perhaps, having read this article the process of inclusion may appear straightforward and without difficulty. This has not been the case. Time spent in mainstream classes has not always been positive. Mistakes have and continue to be made. Finding time to meet, plan and adapt for inclusion places significant demands on teachers, parents and children. However, by attempting to be as thorough as possible when preparing to include a child with SEN, many of these challenges can be lessened and, to a great extent, overcome. The school's inclusion policy now underpins the practice of working as a team, being

flexible and communicating with all partners in the process. Sensitivity to needs, rather than legal imperative, is the driving force.

* The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable support and input by Ms. Jennifer McCann to the inclusion process described in this article.

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