

Based on a paper presented at the Eighteenth Annual Conference on Special Education, IATSE, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, June 8-10, 2006.

Principal Teachers' Perceptions of Inclusive Provision in Mainstream and Transfer to the Special School for Students with Moderate General Learning Disabilities

This article explores one component of a study that the author recently undertook and is an attempt to address the dearth of literature and empirical research relating to the inclusion of pupils with moderate general learning disabilities, in the Irish context. The author investigates principal teachers' perceptions of inclusion for these pupils.

LISA WHITE is a teacher in St. Michael's House School, Ballymun, Dublin.

INTRODUCTION

More children with Moderate General Learning Disabilities (GLD) than ever before are included in mainstream Irish schools. In the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Ireland, 2004) the notion of a common education for all pupils is implicit. However, it is clear from the literature that achieving inclusive education in mainstream schools for all children is problematic (Mittler, 2002; Norwich, 2002; Hornby and Kidd, 2001; Daniels, Hey, Leonard and Smith, 2000).

Principal teachers from both special schools and mainstream primary and secondary schools were asked to illuminate their experiences of inclusion for pupils and schools alike. Essentially, the aim was to examine whether the learning needs of pupils with moderate GLD are being met in the mainstream setting, as perceived by principal teachers in Irish schools, and to contribute to the discussion about how best to serve these pupils in the Irish context. The attitudes and views of the principals highlight the social and academic benefits of inclusion for pupils with moderate GLD, and the challenges of including these pupils in mainstream classes.

THE STUDY

An initial assumption that significant numbers of pupils with moderate GLD were transferring to special schools, despite the inclusive rhetoric of legislation, was tested using a questionnaire. The survey was also intended to elucidate the attitudes and experiences of those participating principal teachers. The questionnaires were given to a theoretical sample (Denscombe, 1998) consisting of thirty-five principal teachers of designated schools for pupils with moderate GLD in Ireland.

In addition to this, the principal teachers of one primary mainstream school and one secondary mainstream school in the vicinity of each special school were included in the study. In total, 105 questionnaires were distributed, thirty-five to each cohort of principals, from special schools, mainstream primary and mainstream secondary schools.

Transfer of Pupils with Moderate GLD from Mainstream to Special Schools

Out of a total of 105 questionnaires that were distributed to principal teachers, seventy-three (70%) were returned. The primary function of the questionnaire was to ascertain whether significant numbers of pupils with moderate GLD actually do transfer to special schools. Special school principals were asked if there were pupils currently enrolled in their schools that had transferred from mainstream settings. Eighty per cent of the respondents stated that they did have a pupil or pupils that had transferred from a mainstream school. Mainstream primary principal teachers corroborated this evidence with 58% stating that over the last five years they had pupils with moderate GLD in their schools that subsequently transferred to a special school. Similarly, 83% of secondary principal teachers reported that pupils with moderate GLD had transferred from their schools to a special school. This indicates that the inclusion of pupils with moderate GLD in mainstream settings becomes increasingly difficult as the pupil graduates through the educational system.

Special School Principals' Perceptions of the Social Benefits of Inclusion for Pupils with Moderate GLD

The special school principal teachers were asked if they had observed social benefits for pupils with moderate GLD, who had transferred from mainstream schools. Approximately three-quarters of these principals replied, and of those, two-thirds perceived that there were no social benefits accrued by the transferring pupils. Many of these respondents (21/31) supported their opinion with comments that demonstrate the social difficulties they observed in pupils as they settle into the special school. The responses can be conceptualised in terms of positive perceptions of the social benefits of mainstream inclusion for pupils with moderate GLD, negative perceptions and views dependent on factors such as pupil and family characteristics.

Pupil and Family Characteristics

Six of the special school principals in this study commented that the social abilities of pupils who transfer from mainstream schools were dependent on pupil characteristics, or more particularly, the family. Comments included:

- *depends very much on the child/family; some well-integrated and have good social skills; others are less so – tend to be 'over-minded' in the mainstream – lower expectations of behaviour;*
- *some appear quite able socially, i.e. general conversation, more opportunities for social interaction – these would come from families who are socially advantaged;*
- *hard to quantify – depends a lot on the child's I.Q. and home environment.*

Perceptions of Positive Social Outcomes of Inclusion for Pupils who Transfer from Mainstream Schools

A minority of special school principals' responses indicated a positive evaluation of the social benefits for pupils who transferred from a mainstream setting. Inclusion in the pupil's own community was noted as a benefit, as was greater interaction with siblings. Typically the positive responses included caveats such as:

- *will know more children in their own area; however this can phase out as the child gets older and their peers become more involved in more complex areas and they are left with less common interests;*

- *yes, in relation to social skills may be able to communicate better but very poor life skills – “I can’t syndrome”.*

Essentially, the data revealed that, in the view of special school principals, there is a general perception that pupils with moderate GLD are not advantaged socially by attending mainstream schools.

Perceptions of Negative Social Outcomes of Inclusion for Pupils with Moderate GLD who Transfer from Mainstream Schools

Seventeen of the twenty-one special school principals’ responses reflected negative perceptions of social benefit for pupils transferring from mainstream. Generally, these pupils were observed as being quiet and withdrawn. Low levels of confidence and self-esteem were identified and the “high incidence of failure” that the pupils were perceived to have experienced was seen as a contributing factor to this. Poor language skills, lack of independence and the particular interest in adult interaction over peers, presented by some of these pupils, were highlighted. A common theme was the perception of the special school principals that pupils with moderate GLD who transferred to their schools developed improved social skills after enrolment in their schools. Also, there is a perception that pupils who attended special schools throughout their education had better social skills:

- *These pupils tend to be generally less able socially than our pupils. Our pupils have more opportunities to do messages etc. throughout the school and have more initiative overall due to specific programmes carried out in a special school.*
- *In the main we have found that pupils who transfer have greater difficulty in interacting with existing pupils and indeed their social, independence and life skills would be somewhat lagging those pupils who have been here from the outset.*

Whether these perspectives reflect an ideological bias in such schools can be examined through the exploration of the views of mainstream principals.

Mainstream Principals’ Perceptions of the Social Benefits of Inclusion for Pupils with Moderate GLD

When asked to define the benefits of including pupils with moderate GLD in mainstream classes, principal teachers from both mainstream primary and secondary schools demonstrated a variety of responses. While social benefits were identified, many of these positive responses focused on the benefits to pupils without GLD and the benefits to the educational system/society of creating more inclusive schools. Two respondents had the perception that stigma is minimised for the children and their families. The responses did not provide many insights into the specific social advantages to pupils with moderate GLD when included in mainstream classes.

The Benefits of Inclusion for Pupils without GLD

Of the thirty-seven mainstream primary and secondary principal teachers that responded to the question about the benefits of including pupils with moderate GLD, nine revealed that they considered that peers without GLD were advantaged. Responses included:

- *It opens the children to the reality that people are different and helps them to develop an awareness of and respect for those differences.*
- *It is good for mainstream children to be exposed to children less able.*
- *It is vital for pupils without a GLD to know that pupils/people have varying needs and abilities.*
- *It benefits the other students in terms of tolerance and understanding.*
- *It encourages mainstream pupils to develop understanding and acceptance of those who are vulnerable/different.*

Conversely, when this group were asked about the challenges of including pupils with GLD, a major theme that emerged was that of the perceived negative effects of inclusion for pupils without GLD. Responses that contradict the above positive views include:

- *Fellow pupils may lose out due to the demands on teachers' time catering for moderate GLD.*
- *It is almost impossible for the mainstream teacher to cater for their specific individual needs throughout the day and deal with all the other groups in the class as well.*

While benefits are perceived, the tension of practically achieving positive outcomes remains unresolved (Croll and Moses, 2000; Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996).

The Social Benefits of Inclusion for Pupils with Moderate GLD

In identifying themes in the responses of mainstream teachers, a large proportion of the comments relating to social benefits reflected broad, generalised views. Many stated, for example, that integration with peers without GLD was a benefit for pupils with GLD. They believed that they “need to belong”, to “feel accepted” and not to be “seen as different”. The principals perceived attendance in mainstream schools in the community with siblings and neighbours as a benefit also. Normalisation was also seen as a positive aspect of inclusion.

Some of the participants did provide more specific examples of actual benefits for the pupils' development. Self-esteem was perceived to be developed through interaction with mainstream peers. The positive social benefits of peer modelling also emerged as a sub-theme:

- *pupil develops in terms of behaviour – imitating some positive behaviour of peers;*
- *less chance of being influenced by disruptive behaviour.*

In general, mainstream principal teachers are not convinced of the social gains of mainstream education for pupils with moderate GLD and many did not cite social benefits at all.

Special School Principals' Perceptions of the Academic Benefits of Inclusion for Pupils with Moderate GLD

Based on their observations of pupils who transferred to their schools, the special school principals were asked whether they perceived that there are academic benefits for pupils with moderate GLD who had attended mainstream schools. Eighty-four per cent of this cohort of teachers responded. In total, 61% of the principals of schools for pupils with moderate GLD felt that there were no academic benefits for the pupils who had subsequently transferred to their special school. Twenty-two and a half per cent perceived that these pupils had benefited academically, to some degree, from attending mainstream school.

In the principals' written comments, the majority of statements made reflected a negative evaluation of the academic benefits of mainstream education for pupils with moderate GLD. Some positive comments were made, however no single response was entirely positive:

- *Some pupils who have transferred have reached a higher academic level but not all pupils present this way. It may be that they were functioning at a higher level from the onset.*
- *Again, it depends on the pupil. Some pupils come to us with the benefits of resource teaching apparent while others are surprisingly academically less advanced than we'd anticipate.*

Pupils' basic reading skills were identified by six respondents as being more advanced, however, four of these responses included reference to the lack of more advanced skills and in particular, comprehension skills:

- *...some tend to be relatively advanced in basic reading skills – often rote – with little comprehension;*
- *good reading skills, but comprehension might not be as good;*
- *reading at a very basic level but with no comprehension.*

The responses of the special school principals tended to focus on the academic deficits of those pupils that transfer to their schools from mainstream schools.

Negative Perceptions of the Academic Benefits of Inclusion in Mainstream Schools

The negative responses of the special school principal teachers can be broadly conceived in terms of three sub-themes, comparison with the special school, pupils' self-concept and pupil dependence on one-to-one learning. Of the twenty-one responses, eleven can be seen to relate to principals' views that the special school provides an equal or better standard of education for pupils with moderate GLD. Comments that characterise this theme include:

- *Most do not function as well as if they had been placed in a good special school....*
- *Staff are of the opinion that our students present with higher levels of abilities and performance.*
- *Special school pupils often have higher level of academic achievement.*
- *They tend to be at the same level as those who stayed in special school.*

Self-Concept

The self-concept of pupils who transfer from mainstream schools was also a common sub-theme in the data. The principal teachers identified pupils' experiences of failure and low self-esteem. The lack of self-assurance experienced by some of the pupils was described:

- *very aware of their inabilities – readily say “I can't do this”; lack of confidence in their abilities.*

Finally, three of the special school principals commented on a perceived pupil dependence on a one-to-one learning situation. They mentioned the apparent one-to-one time spent with special needs assistants and resource teachers that can render group work more challenging for those pupils who transfer to special schools.

Mainstream Principals' Perceptions of the Academic Benefits of Inclusion for Pupils with Moderate GLD

Mainstream primary and secondary principal teachers were asked what the benefits of including these pupils in mainstream schools were. Only five of the thirty-eight responses referred to the academic benefits of inclusion in mainstream for pupils with moderate GLD. The positive effect of inclusion on raising expectations for these pupils was perceived as the main benefit for these pupils in the mainstream setting:

- *Mainstream school may raise expectation/standards of pupil who will strive harder.*
- *Higher expectation often leads to greater achievement.*

From the previous section, it seems that principal teachers are unconvinced of the social benefits of inclusion for pupils with moderate GLD. What also emerges from the data is that they are even less persuaded of the academic benefits for this group. The following section will explore general principal attitudes towards inclusion.

Principal Teacher Attitudes to Inclusion for Pupils with Moderate GLD

Two aspects of the questionnaire for principal teachers were designed to specifically explore the attitudes of principal teachers towards the inclusion of pupils with moderate GLD. Firstly, participants were asked which levels of GLD they felt it is possible to include in mainstream schools. A scale provided the possible categories of choice, ranging from borderline, mild and moderate GLD to severe and profound GLD. Almost all of the participants completed this section of the questionnaire (71/73), with only one principal stating that none of the levels could be included in mainstream settings. No principal indicated that pupils with profound GLD could be included and only one principal, from a special school, perceived that pupils with severe GLD could be included.

Principal teachers demonstrated openness to including pupils with borderline GLD, with 98.5% stating these pupils can be included in mainstream classes. Sixty-five per cent agreed that pupils with mild GLD can be included, which indicates that even in this inclusive age, one third were not open to including such pupils. Surprisingly, only one third (34%) of principals felt that pupils with moderate GLD could be included.

Some of these principals chose to temper their responses with comments which provide a rationale for their views:

- *Provided the educational and support services are appropriate and in place – all [can be included]; in the present system very few individuals.*
- *At the moment, insufficient resources are provided to meet needs of pupils with mild/moderate GLD in mainstream classes.*
- *This is a complex issue. If training and information on difficulties had been given before students were sent to schools, I feel the response would be much better. It has been dealt with very unsatisfactorily.*
- *I have serious reservations about the inclusion of students with moderate GLD, not because of the workload on teachers and administration, but because I have seen at least one student, currently enrolled, being seriously disadvantaged by attendance here.*

Perceptions of Suitable Placements for Pupils with Moderate GLD

Two statements asked whether pupils with moderate GLD can readily have their needs met in mainstream primary and secondary schools. Sixty-seven per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed that their needs could be readily met in the primary school, while 85% disagreed or strongly disagreed that these pupils could have their needs met in mainstream secondary schools. When asked to rate the statement that special schools are better able to meet the needs of pupils with moderate GLD, 79.5% of participants agreed or strongly agreed. In another statement relating to this, principals were asked to rate the statement that there is no real need for special schools anymore. Again, 79.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

School and Teacher Readiness for Inclusion

Three statements attempted to establish whether principal teachers consider that schools and teachers are ‘ready’ for inclusion. The principals were asked if teachers in mainstream schools need better training in order to meet the needs of pupils with moderate GLD. Fifty-three and a half per cent agreed or strongly agreed that teachers do require additional training. When the various cohorts of teachers were split, the need perceived by the principals in the various settings was revealed. Eighty-seven and a half per cent of primary mainstream principals felt that teachers needed extra training, while 90% of secondary principals identified a need. On the other hand, only 6.5% of special school principals felt that mainstream teachers needed better training. This may reflect a view in special schools that “effective teaching is the same for all pupils” (Norwich and Lewis, 2001).

On the subject of teachers, the principals were asked to rate the statement that teachers are not open to including pupils with moderate GLD in mainstream classes. The views of principal teachers from both mainstream primary and secondary schools reflected homogeneity of opinion, with 62.5% of primary principals and 61% of secondary principals disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement. However, only 39% of special school principals believed that teachers in mainstream are open to including pupils with moderate GLD.

In terms of the statement that mainstream schools are sufficiently resourced to meet the needs of all learners, the principal teachers from all school settings were

unanimous in their disagreement. Ninety-two per cent demonstrated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Pupils with Moderate GLD and their Peers

The principals were asked whether they concurred with the statement that it is advantageous for pupils with moderate GLD to be educated alongside pupils without moderate GLD. The mainstream teachers were generally in agreement with this sentiment with 54% of primary principals agreeing and 61% of secondary principals also positive in relation to the concept. Fewer special school principals agreed, with only 39% convinced. When the statement was altered to state that it is advantageous for pupils without GLD to be educated alongside pupils with moderate GLD, half (50%) of the primary principals agreed or strongly agreed that non-GLD peers benefited from learning with pupils with moderate GLD. Forty-five per cent of secondary principals felt that pupils benefit from learning with pupils with GLD. Yet again, special school principals were less certain of the benefits to non-GLD peers, with 29% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

On a similar theme, a final statement stating that pupils with moderate GLD in mainstream schools forge true and long-lasting relationships with pupils without GLD was presented. The mainstream principals were split with 37.5% of primary principals in agreement and 29% disagreeing with the concept. Forty per cent of the secondary principals were convinced of the quality of friendships between pupils with moderate GLD and their mainstream peers, whereas 39% were not in agreement with the statement. Yet again, special school principals did not concur with the views of the mainstream principals with 74% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that reciprocal friendships are developed in the mainstream setting. A mere 6% agreed that this was the case.

When the responses are considered, certain contradictions are revealed. This highlights the multi-dimensionality of principal teacher experiences and attitudes that reflect the complexity of including pupils with moderate GLD in mainstream schools. Irish principal teachers may be seen to echo the principal teachers in Croll and Moses (2000) study whose sentiments are encapsulated in the phrase- “I am absolutely committed to inclusion in principle but...” (p.5).

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several concerns or themes for consideration arise from the study. From these, several recommendations can be deduced. Dyson (2000) promotes a balance between the rights and ethics discourse with the efficacy discourse. Socio-political arguments for inclusion emphasise dissipating the notions of ‘normality’ and ‘averageness’ in mainstream schools. However, the drive for academic attainment in mainstream schools is still based on such concepts (Cornwall, 2002). At the same time, it is sociologically and politically ‘appropriate’ to criticise the special school even though an “inclusive system is not yet proven to be the best way forward” (Cornwall, p. 133).

Curriculum and Teacher Training

Robertson (2002) describes how the socio-political perspective has emphasised disability issues, without fully exploring the impact of this on theories of curriculum. Mainstream schools must endeavour to combine access to the common curriculum, while at the same time consider ways that additional and augmentative aspects of curriculum may be incorporated for these children.

In order to enable all teachers to meet the needs of learners with moderate GLD, initial teacher training courses will have to provide training that is relevant to meeting the needs of all learners. Garner (2002) tells of “the lie that a ‘qualified teacher’ has at least covered the basic principals inherent to inclusion” (p.62). Similarly, in-service teachers require on-going opportunities to enhance their skills.

Further research needs to be developed that evaluates social and learning outcomes for these pupils. Parents in Ireland can choose which setting to send their child to, but it must be ensured that children are not “shoe-horned” (Gains, 2002, p. 173) into mainstream schools, based solely on considerations of political correctness.

REFERENCES

Cornwall, J. (2002) Enabling Inclusion: Is the Culture of Change Being Responsibly Managed? In O’Brien, T. (ed.), *Enabling Inclusion – Blue Skies...Dark Clouds?* London: Optimus Publishing, pp. 127-142.

Croll, P. and Moses, D. (2000) Ideologies and Utopias: Education Professionals’ Views of Inclusion, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, Vol. 15 (1), pp. 1-12.

Daniels, H., Hey, V., Leonard, D. and Smith, M. (2000) Issues of Equity in Special Needs Education as Seen from the Perspective of Gender. In Daniels, H. (ed.) *Special Education Reformed – Beyond Rhetoric?* London: Falmer.

Denscombe, M. (1998) *The Good Research Guide for Small Research Projects*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Dyson, A. (2000) Questioning, Understanding and Supporting the Inclusive School. In Daniels, H. (ed.) *Special Education Reformed: Beyond Rhetoric*, London: Falmer.

Gains, C. (2002) Inclusion: Delusions, Routes and Destinations. In O’Brien, T. (ed.), *Enabling Inclusion – Blue Skies...Dark Clouds?* London: Optimus Publishing, pp. 171-180.

Garner, P. (2002) Goodbye Mr. Chips: Special Needs, Inclusive Education and the Deceit of Initial Teacher Training. In O’Brien, T. (ed.), *Enabling Inclusion Blue Skies...Dark Clouds?* London: Optimus Publishing, pp. 53-64.

Hornby, G. and Kidd, R. (2001) Transfer from Special to Mainstream – Ten Years Later, *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 28 (1), pp. 10-17.

- Ireland (2004) *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004*, Dublin: The Stationery Office.
- Mittler, P. (2002) Educating Pupils with Intellectual Disabilities in England: Thirty Years On, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, Vol. 49 (2), pp. 145-159.
- Norwich, B. (2002) Education, Inclusion and Individual Differences: Recognising and Resolving Dilemmas, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 50 (4), pp. 482-502.
- Norwich, B. and Lewis, A. (2001) Mapping a Pedagogy for Special Educational Needs, *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 27 (3), pp. 313-329.
- Robertson, C. (2002) The Social Model of Inclusion and the Rough Ground of Inclusive Education. In O'Brien, T. (ed.) *Enabling Inclusion – Blue Skies...Dark Clouds?* London: Optimus Publishing, pp.113-125.
- Scruggs, T. and Mastropieri, M.A. (1996) Teacher Perceptions of Mainstreaming/Inclusion, 1958-1995: A Research Synthesis, *Exceptional Children*, Vol. 63, pp. 59-74.