REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland, Vol. 20.2 (2007), 119–129

Based on the Keynote Address at the Eighteenth Annual Conference on Special Education, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin, June 8-10, 2006.

Inclusion: Provision, Practice and Curriculum – Time for a Closer Look

The rate at which pupils with special educational needs have been included in mainstream education in recent years in Ireland has been startling. With so much change having occurred so quickly, many new policies, procedures and initiatives have had to be developed to facilitate inclusive practices. Several of these developments are mentioned in this address.

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INTRODUCTION

The Conference theme this year, *Defining the Inclusive School*, is a familiar one and it poses quite a challenge. There are many valid definitions of the inclusive school which have emerged over the years, so I do not intend to add to the collection. It is the subheading, *Exploring Provision, Practice and Curriculum in Special and Mainstream Schools*, which warrants a closer look. There have been several major significant developments in the Irish education system in a few short years which have impacted on provision, practice and curriculum. Some of these are well known to most of you here, such as the recent legislation and the establishment of new agencies by the Department of Education and Science (DES). But many studies and initiatives carried out by schools, teachers, psychologists and students on master's degree courses have contributed to a clearer picture of the current situation regarding the education of children with special educational needs (SEN) and have provided insights into perceptions of inclusive practices from principals, parents and teachers.

BACKGROUND

Sixteen years ago, in 1990, the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) was established. This was a major initiative of the Department of Education. It was the first time the entire area of special education in this country was examined. The main aim was to determine the current status of special education provision and to make recommendations to government on needs in the area to which the system might respond. The committee reported in 1993 and made a number of recommendations that would advance the inclusion of children in mainstream schools, should the government act on them. There were also recommendations for expanding the role of special schools with a view to sharing expertise with mainstream schools, as special schools had built up serious expertise over many years.

The adoption of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) by the World Conference on Special Needs Education caused major waves by proclaiming firstly, the right of all children to education (when there were still some groups not in education), and also that "those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools"

(p. viii). Since that time, concepts of equality and rights in particular have maintained the momentum of the inclusive education movement. The movement took off at a great pace, without much consideration of the implications for teachers, pupils (whether with or without SEN), resources (both human and material), or, indeed, without much consideration for special schools. In the inclusion debate, literature has focused on changing mainstream schooling with relatively little focus, until recently, on the role of special schools.

THOUGHTS ON INCLUSION

The debate about inclusion should not be based on the premise that inclusion is the ideal, is the best for the child's education. It is for many, and not just for those with special needs. But, we must remember to consider the child's overall needs in the first instance and make informed, collaborative decisions based on those needs. A number of researchers have remarked on the difficulty of achieving inclusion for all children with SEN. Most studies have looked at experiences and achievements of children with higher rather than lower cognitive ability. More evidence is needed on the overall achievement levels, both academic and social, of children in mainstream schools who have more serious levels of learning difficulty. A number of studies have also revealed that including pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties constitutes a greater challenge to schools than all other areas of SEN (Groom, 2006).

Continuum of Provision

We must remember that the continuum of provision is still available, although sometimes one would wonder. What has been happening lately is the reverse of the practice that operated only about 20 years ago. Then, if a child were identified as having a mild general learning disability, separate provision would have been recommended – either a special school or a special class in a mainstream school. Now, as O'Keeffe (2004) pointed out, the opposite appears to be happening. Psychologists are tending to automatically recommend mainstream education without informing parents of available options, including specialist settings. If parents are not offered informed choices, they are inclined to accept the psychologist's recommendation. McGee (2004) also talked about placement decisions, highlighting the fact that many psychologists had no experience of special education and would not have known what special schools had to offer. He also reminded us at the time that the "Special Education Review Committee saw the special school as one element in a continuum of provision" (p. 78).

Classroom Environments

Wedell (1995, cited in Mullen White, 2005) suggests that the educational environments into which we are trying to include pupils with SEN are not appropriate – that is because they are based on the misconceived assumption that pupils in the same class level or same age group have the same learning needs. His point is a good one and is evident in many classes in this country. Have all children the same learning needs? Should children with SEN be expected to follow the same learning programme as others in their class? It is very common to see whole class groups being taught together, as a homogeneous group. What ever happened to grouping children? Not long ago a few of us, who have been going into schools regularly for a number of

years, were talking about this practice and remarked that there was more teaching of groups 20 years ago than there is now. How much more difficult is it to differentiate within a group of 25-30 than in a group of 6 or 8 or 10? Much of the literature points to school structures and teaching arrangements as barriers to inclusive education.

The issue of whole-class teaching has been addressed by Day (2005) who offers several excellent practical suggestions for organising classrooms differently and incorporating different approaches, including cooperative learning and cooperative teaching. I often think about teachers in rural schools who have years of experience teaching multi-level classes. No doubt they have also had children with SEN in their classes long before inclusion, or even integration, was ever mentioned. I imagine they may have a great deal to offer to teachers in larger mainstream schools on differentiating instruction within a mixed ability group.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Much has happened in this country since the publication of the SERC Report (1993) that has had an impact on inclusion for pupils with SEN – legislation, press releases, circulars, the establishment of task forces and support agencies, teacher education, teacher or school-led initiatives, research and, unfortunately, even court cases. It is worth mentioning a number of these developments because each, in some way, has influenced provision, practice and curriculum.

Government Legislation and Initiatives

The following developments have had a major impact on provision, in particular:

- **Education Act** (Ireland, 1998) – in this Act the Minister will have to "ensure…that there is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person." There was no mention about where those needs should be met so that pertains to all children no matter where their education is taking place. In most people's minds, regarding education for children with SEN, this Act was superseded by the EPSEN Act 2004, but was actually a most important piece of legislation.
- **Ministerial Press Release** (DES, 1998) – while this was not legislation, it came near enough in some people's minds. Micheál Martin, Minister for Education at the time, announced "that each child…will have an automatic entitlement to the level of teaching and child care support which their condition requires." The measures announced that day, and approved by Government, were aimed at ensuring that all children with a Special Educational Need, irrespective of their location or disability, would receive the support they require to participate fully in the education system. It is not clear if the minister realised the full implications of what he was saying but many groups have built upon what he said.
- **Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN)** (Ireland, 2004) – The EPSEN Act entitles children with SEN to be educated "in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs" and goes on to say that they " shall have the same right to avail of, and benefit

from, appropriate education as do their peers who do not have such needs" (title page), but, as we know, only as resources permit.

- **Equal Status Act 2000**
- **Education Welfare Act 2000**
- **Disability Act 2005**

Although not directly addressing the work of schools and teachers, these last three pieces of legislation do have some bearing on our area of work.

Agencies/Support Services

The DES has established agencies whose roles include supporting children with SEN and/or their teachers and schools:

- **National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1998**
- **National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), 1999**
- **National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2003**
- **Special Education Support Service (SESS), 2003**
- **National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS), 2006**

Wider Range of Influences

A variety of initiatives has emerged in recent years with the aim of preparing teachers and schools to provide inclusive learning environments for their pupils and to enable them to better meet their needs:

- **Pre-service education** – a compulsory module on SEN for pre-service primary teachers in initial training has been delivered for the past 10 years in this college.

- **Increase in professional development courses** – a greater number of in-service Diploma courses in Special Education; also, Certificate courses for teachers of children on the autistic spectrum; summer courses, some online, focusing on teaching children with a range of SEN.

- ***Learning Support Guidelines*** (DES, 2000) – these guidelines were substantially revised from the original 1988 *Remedial Teachers' Guidelines*; the focus is now on such issues as classroom and support teachers working collaboratively, writing individual profiles and learning programmes for the children in need of learning support and recording progress; they also include much more emphasis on parental involvement in the support process.

- ***Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with Special Educational Needs*** (NCCA, 2002) – these are still in draft form but were issued to all schools, mainstream and special, to be examined and responded to. They are meant for all teachers, regardless of setting, and aim to help teachers plan and implement the curriculum for students with severe/profound, moderate and mild general learning disabilities. The revised and final documents are in the pipeline.

- **Task Forces**
  - **Dyslexia, July 2001**
  - **Autism, October 2001**

- **Student Behaviour in Second Level Schools, April 2006**

- **DES Circulars** – the circular which seems to have had the greatest impact on schools lately is Circular 02/05 (preceded by 24/03 and 09/04 and further clarified by 36/06) which describes the General Allocation Model put in place by the DES. There still seems to be some confusion as to how resources are to be deployed. How helpful is it to shift support for a child with dyslexia, for example, who last year had the help of a learning support teacher who had a specialist qualification but this year that child gets help from a resource teacher, just out of college, with no additional training?

- **Court cases** – an interesting, and unfortunate, practice emerged from a court case in which a judge made a ruling that a child was to receive x number of hours/week of individual teaching from a resource teacher. Very quickly this became the norm for all resource teachers who understood that they were all to work on a 1-1 basis with children identified as having SEN. With a full caseload of 6-8 pupils per day, there were plenty of children left in the school who were getting no help at all. This practice has changed now and the expected teaching arrangement is explained in Circular 36/06. It is worth noting that, as a result of court cases, there was an immediate response from the DES for the urgent training of teachers of children with autism, but this urgency was not replicated for other groups, e.g. children with severe and profound general learning disabilities.

- **Outreach Programmes** – there are some very good examples of outreach initiatives as well as links between mainstream and special schools for specific activities and projects.

    - **Marino School, Bray** – since 1993, this school, which is essentially a special school for pupils with physical disabilities, has been involved in informal links with local mainstream primary and post-primary schools. Since 1997, however, the school formalised these links somewhat by assigning to the resource teacher the job of developing more formal linkages between schools. The school now operates 2 different types of joint programmes – one they call a Links Programme, in which pupils from Marino School and mainstream schools work together on shared activities and projects, perhaps once a week, alternating schools; the other is a shared placement arrangement in which pupils from the special school spend a day or more in a mainstream school, preferably in their local community, depending on the needs and abilities of the individual pupils. So while still benefiting from individualised instruction and therapy programmes in their special school, they are socialising and enjoying shared learning environments with peers from their community. The Marino staff acknowledges that there are many practical issues to sort out but most of these are system issues beyond their control.

- **The National Rehabilitation Hospital School**, **Dun Laoghaire** – this special school operates an outreach programme of a different sort. The principal of the school has negotiated with the DES to be released from her normal duties for 6 months to continue an informal project of preparing schools and teachers to receive from her school a pupil who has acquired brain injury. Providing information about the disability and its implications and offering suggestions for teaching arrangements and strategies have helped to ease anxieties as well as to better prepare the staff for their new pupil. Such a service – a very good example of an outreach programme – should go a long way towards realistic preparation for including a pupil with a very particular type of disability. No extra layer of support is called for here – just effective communication between schools and the sharing of expertise. Reports thus far are very promising.

- **Deansrath Community College, Dublin, and Scoil Dara, Kilcock –** Post-primary schools as well have been busy concentrating on ways to become more inclusive schools. Some have initiated outreach programmes involving their wider educational community; some have incorporated and promoted the full range of options in the state exams. At least one school is known to have commented on feeling the victim of their own success. They have done such a good job of including pupils with SEN, they are beginning to wonder if they are becoming a 'special' school. At a recent conference last January (2006), hosted by the Church of Ireland College of Education, two post-primary schools described their projects which involved the wider education community.

As is evident, several very useful developments have taken place in a very short time. However, there is every danger that all the different support agencies, all the in-service courses, all the independent initiatives, no matter how worthwhile, may be piecemeal efforts to offer assistance in bringing about change. A much more cohesive approach is warranted, one in which communication and collaboration are prominent.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Yet more projects and initiatives are in progress which will impact further on provision, practice and curriculum.

Review of Special Schools and Special Classes in Mainstream Primary Schools

In 2005, Minister Mary Hanafin announced that the DES was to undertake a review of the role of special schools and special classes attached to mainstream primary schools. This was undertaken in partnership with the Special Education Department of St. Patrick's College and the report should be available in early 2007. "One of the purposes of the review is to examine how the role and potential of special schools can be optimised". It is envisaged that one of the outcomes will be "to develop mechanisms to facilitate the sharing of expertise in special schools and to begin the process of creating 'learning communities of schools'." In developing a resource role

for the special school, the DES would be acknowledging the unique contribution and value of these schools.

Formation of a National Behavioural Support Service (NBSS)
Also in 2005, Minister Hanafin set up a task force to examine student behaviour in second level schools. Findings were reported in April 2006. Having found serious behavioural problems in some schools, it was decided to introduce a number of measures to address the problems. The Minister has recommended yet another layer of support in the system, new regional Behaviour Support Teams who will work with schools that have significant discipline problems. Also to be established (on a pilot basis) are Behaviour Support Classrooms.

Guidelines (final) for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities
As mentioned above, the draft guidelines issued in 2002 have been a work in progress and will soon be ready to circulate to schools once again, having been revised and expanded by the various working groups who received very helpful feedback from teachers on the ground.

IEP Guidelines
These guidelines are to be issued this month (June, 2006) by the NCSE. While many teachers have been writing IEPs long before they were specified in the EPSEN Act, for the most part, they have been writing them on their own rather than engaging in the intended collaborative process. I would expect the guidelines to offer clear guidance on the process of writing and reviewing IEPs.

Irish Research on Inclusion
There have been a number of significant research studies carried out in this country in recent years by, amongst others, teachers pursuing master's degrees. While many findings related to inclusion have been expected and are similar to those reported in other countries, some results have been surprising, particularly regarding perceptions of inclusion by those most closely involved – parents, teachers, principals and the pupils themselves. It is essential that such studies continue and the findings be reported widely.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Mary Warnock, who headed a government commission in 1978 into the education of children with special educational needs and pioneered the concept of inclusion, has recently expressed serious concern about the state of inclusive education in Britain (Warnock, 2005). It may be a bit strong to suggest she has made a u-turn. It may be more accurate to say she is expressing her disappointment about a process which she believes is failing right now. Similar opinions are also coming from the United States.

How close are we in Ireland to offering inclusive education to all? I honestly do not know but I do know that we have come a long way, that teachers are generally much better informed, better prepared and willing to meet children's needs. Interestingly, in the last few years, we have seen more special classes being set up for children with autism and behavioural support classrooms are soon to appear. While these

developments would not be looked on favourably by 'inclusionists', are they wrong? Parents of children in these special classes believe passionately that this is the education that is appropriate for their children. Are these backward steps? Or are they necessary because it is what those pupils need right now?

Suggestions to facilitate inclusion are also offered by IATSE (2006). They call for greater links between special and mainstream schools, as envisaged in the SERC Report of 1993 – links such as outreach connections, dual enrolment of pupils, designated special schools acting as centres of excellence and as resource centres, linking of schools for specific activities. I have already mentioned some excellent examples of such initiatives.

CONCLUSION

It is time to evaluate the effectiveness of the various initiatives and outreach programmes operating in schools. Are they all worthwhile with something valuable to offer all involved? What factors account for their success? A major rethink is needed on the best way to offer support to schools, teachers and children. It is also time to examine the effectiveness of the various support services. Does more teacher time equal 'better'? Some schools have more support teachers and SNAs than class teachers. Where children receive help from a support teacher, are they still typically being withdrawn from their classrooms for this? What message does this give the child? His classmates? Is this what inclusion means? The roles and relationships between all the support services in place at the moment need to be clarified – that includes NEPS, the NCCA, the NCSE, the SESS and the newly formed NBSS. If schools are meant to be inclusive learning environments, embracing all pupils with their wide range of needs, learning and otherwise, where does the Department of Health and Children or the Health Service Executive (HSE) fit in? Children have needs requiring speech therapy, physical therapy, etc. yet our mainstream schools are still attached firmly, and only, to the education umbrella.

While most professionals would agree with inclusion in principle, from a rights point of view, many see enormous difficulties in practice. Hegarty (2001, cited in Porter and Lacey, 2002) shifted the focus away from the issue of inclusion and onto, perhaps, the greater importance of quality education when he said, "Children have a right to high quality education of which inclusion is a part. Inclusion is not the most important factor and may in some cases be difficult or even impossible if high quality education is to be provided". Those are sound words and I think it is time that we pause to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in our schools – the organisation and practice of teaching, the learning environments, the appropriateness of the curriculum for all children, and the range of provision and supports.

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