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## **Stalling Beneath the Summit: Why is Progress Towards Inclusion Proving Elusive?**

**Despite considerable efforts to increase inclusion in schools, a small but significant number of pupils with special educational needs continue to require segregated provision. Why does the attainment of full inclusion remain elusive?**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past decade a commitment to promote a more inclusive education system can be seen to have exercised education policy makers across Europe and indeed across many of the world's countries (Meijer, 2003; Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004). International agreements, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), have focused upon the injustices which have characterised the education of pupils with special educational needs and those from other marginalised communities. These important documents have established an intention to provide and maintain a more equitable approach to schooling for all.

The debates surrounding inclusion have generated a broad corpus of literature, have led to new policies at local, regional and national levels in many countries, and have encouraged teachers to examine their teaching approaches in order to identify strategies and styles which encourage wider participation. The energy expended in efforts to increase inclusion and reduce exclusion has been considerable and can be seen to have had a significant impact. Yet it would appear that all of the efforts made by policy makers, campaigning organisations and teachers to provide fully inclusive schools have failed to achieve that ultimate goal. Whilst these efforts will, quite rightly, continue and will hopefully build upon the successes achieved to date, it may be timely to consider why the attainment of *full inclusion* remains elusive and appears to be stalling some way beneath the summit.

### **RATE OF PROGRESS TOWARDS INCLUSION**

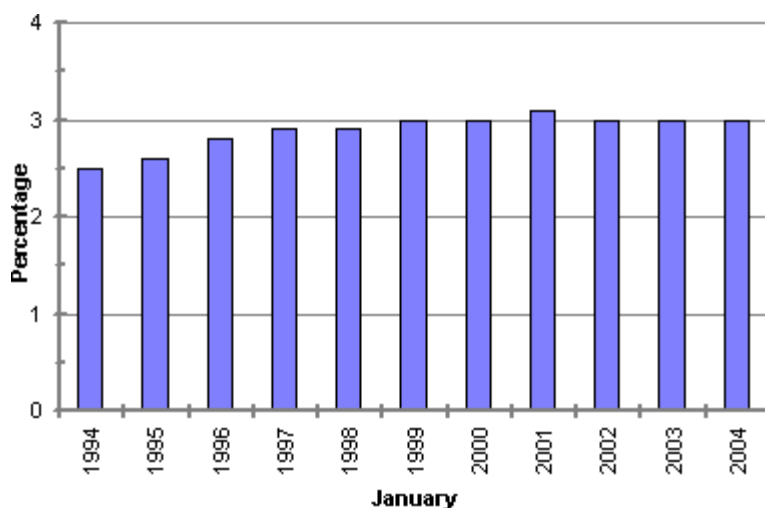
In reviewing the advances made towards the achievement of a more inclusive approach to education in English schools, a recent report from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2004) expressed some concern that the rate of progress towards inclusion appears to be slower than had previously been hoped for. In particular, they take as evidence of this slow progress the numbers of statements of

special educational needs issued to pupils for whom inclusion is seen to be dependent upon the allocation of additional resources, and the number of pupils currently educated in special schools. These two indicators would certainly appear to be worthy providers of an idea about how effective policies for the promotion of inclusive schools have been. However, unless we look beyond the simple statistics provided and attempt to analyse both the way in which they have been interpreted and the reality which underpins them, we are in danger of presenting a picture of special and inclusive education which tells less than the full story.

If we take an example from the Ofsted report and begin with the use of statements as a means of determining how successful inclusion policy has been, we must do so by re-examining the original purpose of introducing statementing procedures. In England, statements have been intended as a safeguard through which the necessary resources, both human and material, could be secured in order to ensure that a pupil's special educational needs were met. As increased efforts have been made to provide greater numbers of teachers with the essential skills required to address a range of special educational needs, and with an increase in resources which has included the provision of additional teaching assistants in most English schools, it was anticipated that the need to provide statements would diminish. It was anticipated that a model of increased confidence in mainstream school teachers in addressing the needs of a more diverse population would enable schools to accommodate these pupils without recourse to further resources identified through statements. However, an examination of the statistics, which identify numbers of pupils to whom statements have been provided in recent years, shows that the overall percentage of pupils in English schools with statements has remained almost static. Indeed, since a low of around 2.5% in 1994, there has been a gradual increase to 3%, a figure which has persisted throughout the early years of the twenty-first century.

**Table 1**

**Pupils with statements of SEN as a percentage of all pupils, England, January 1994 to 2004**



(Source: *Department for Education and Skills, National Statistics* [November 2004])

These figures from the UK may be seen to have some parallels in Ireland. Kenny, Loxley and Shevlin (2005) report that the numbers of pupils with recognised assessed special educational needs went up by 41% between 1998 and 2003. In primary schools the figure represents 3.6% of the overall population in this age range, a figure not greatly different to that for pupils who have statements in the UK.

A second indicator, the numbers of pupils attending segregated special provision, is used by Ofsted and others (Rieser, 2003) to present an equally negative picture in respect of the progress made towards inclusion. In 1997, the UK government issued a Green Paper, *Excellence for All Children* (DfEE, 1997), in which it was stated that:

By 2002 a growing number of mainstream schools will be willing and able to accept children with a range of special educational needs: as a consequence, an increasing proportion of those children with statements of SEN who would currently be placed in special schools will be educated in mainstream schools. (DfEE, 1997, p. 52)

Here again, if we take the statistics provided by the Department for Education and Skills (2004) we find that the intention to decrease special school populations and increase numbers of pupils with special educational needs attending mainstream schools appears to have remained fairly consistent.

**Table 2**

**Placement percentage of pupils with special educational needs by school type (England) 2000 - 2004**

(Source: *Department for Education and Skills National Statistics (November 2004)*)

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
<b>Mainstream primary</b>	<b>28.7</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>28.4</b>	<b>28.1</b>
<b>Mainstream secondary</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>31.8</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>31.7</b>	<b>31.7</b>
<b>Maintained special</b>	<b>34.4</b>	<b>33.9</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>34.2</b>	<b>34.0</b>
<b>Non-maintained special</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.9</b>

Such statistics may be useful in providing data, which can inform discussion about issues surrounding the current state of inclusion. However, we must exercise some caution when interpreting these if we are to go beyond the initial reaction of dismay and seek some understanding of what the figures can tell us about how to move forward within the inclusion agenda.

**CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR INCLUSION**

A useful starting point for discussing the current state of inclusion and trying to understand the statistics presented above can be gained by considering what we know about the creation of inclusive classrooms. Whilst much of the inclusion debate over the past twenty years has been characterised by rhetoric and a necessary focus upon issues of human rights, teachers in schools have confronted the challenge presented by pupils with special educational needs through an examination of their classroom practices. This, combined with a focus by some researchers upon the conditions created in inclusive schools has provided a range of significant insights into those measures taken which have been successful in promoting inclusive practice. Writers such as Thomas, Walker and Webb (1998), Florian and Rouse (2001), Rose (2001), Skidmore (2004) and Ring and Travers (2005) have discussed features of inclusive classrooms and the ways in which teachers have adopted strategies to ensure that pupils who would previously have been educated in segregated settings have been successfully taught alongside their peers.

An examination of literature which reports successful inclusion indicates that teachers have become increasingly adept at developing practices which have benefited not only those pupils described as having special educational needs, but have also had an impact upon others in the class. Thomas et al (1998) provide a list of factors which they recognised as being critical to the foundation of inclusive classroom practice, this comprising:

- ◆ The format of the lesson
- ◆ The arrangement of groups
- ◆ Changes in delivery of instruction
- ◆ Adapted goals (differentiation by outcome)
- ◆ Different materials
- ◆ Personal support
- ◆ An alternative task (differentiation by activity) (p. 42)

Each of these areas has received attention from writers and researchers, most of whom would concur that changing classrooms to ensure that teaching approaches are focused upon the needs of individual pupils whilst maintaining effective management of the whole class is a key element of supporting inclusion.

### **Differentiation**

Approaches to differentiation have been well rehearsed in many studies (Lewis, 1991; Visser, 1997; O'Brien and Guiney, 2001) and official documentation has recognised the significant impact that well differentiated teaching can have upon pupils with special educational needs (Department of Education and Science, 2001). Progress in this area has been considerable and in many classrooms well differentiated planning has become a feature which has enabled a broad range of pupils to gain curricular access.

In evaluating the implementation of the curriculum in primary schools in Ireland, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science (2005) reports that three

quarters of teachers seen were effectively differentiating for lessons in English, though this dropped to only half of teachers seen in mathematics. The attention which inspectors, both in Ireland and the UK, are now giving to the efforts of teachers to promote inclusion through effective teaching is indicative of a greater understanding of what is possible. It also suggests an anticipation of an increased expectation of higher achievements for pupils who may in the past have been likely to have failed.

### **Structured Teaching Approaches**

Innovative approaches to classroom practice, based upon structured teaching and the deployment of techniques specifically aimed at a wide range of teaching styles, are enabling more pupils to succeed and in many instances have increased teacher confidence. Howley and Kime (2003) have suggested that the management of individual learning presents a considerable challenge to teachers working in inclusive schools. However, they propose that our understanding of how to develop structured approaches, which are supportive of pupils and recognise individuality of preferred learning styles, has progressed greatly in recent years. Furthermore, through demonstrating how approaches developed for the management of pupils with autistic spectrum disorders or those with dyslexia can be utilised in mainstream classroom situations, the authors express the view that techniques developed for use with specific populations of pupils with special educational needs may be generalisable to others in the class.

Other studies have looked at the effectiveness of strategies to support the teaching of pupils with clearly defined needs. Evans, Harden and Thomas (2004) conducted an investigation to ascertain those approaches which may be effective in supporting the inclusion of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. They concluded that there was evidence to suggest that the implementation of specific programmes of intervention could have an impact in supporting inclusion. As more schools have been prepared to consider the use of specific teaching programmes, so has our understanding increased of how these may foster more inclusive practice. However, it has been suggested by a number of researchers (Lewis and Norwich, 2001; Davis and Florian, 2004) that our understanding of effective teaching for inclusion remains incomplete and that there is an urgent need for further research in this area.

### **Effective Support**

The provision of effective support for teachers is a further area which has received attention in the special needs literature. In England between 1992 and 1996 the numbers of support staff working in primary schools increased by 56% (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). Many of these colleagues were appointed specifically to support teachers in the management of pupils with special educational needs. The introduction of new training opportunities and a national standard (the Higher Level Teaching Assistant) has emphasised the important role which these professional colleagues play in schools. Research from Northern Ireland has shown that with careful management, the role of the teaching assistant may be a critical factor in providing teachers with the confidence to retain pupils with learning difficulties in mainstream classrooms (Moran and Abbott, 2002). However, we are

only just beginning to understand issues which surround the effective management of these additional adults in the classroom.

The use of teaching assistants in the UK or special needs assistants in Ireland needs to be carefully monitored if we are not to undermine processes of inclusion by creating dependency in pupils. The allocation of special needs assistants to individual pupils may enable them to be retained in a classroom from which they would otherwise have been excluded. However, the provision of such support can in some instances result in teachers abdicating their responsibilities to the special needs assistant, and can also lead to situations in which pupils demonstrate a learned dependency in which they cannot operate unless individually supported. Varying models of management of special needs assistants are emerging (Cremin, Thomas and Vincett, 2003; Groom and Rose, 2005) and, as we begin to analyse the impact which these may have upon the ability to include pupils more effectively in learning, so should it become possible to ensure that pupils succeed in our classrooms.

What is clear is that our understanding of the conditions necessary to promote inclusive schooling has increased considerably in recent years. Many, though not all teachers have changed their practices in order to accommodate a more diverse classroom population. Such teachers have been innovative in their consideration and provision of differentiated teaching approaches, some have adopted specialist strategies which have proved effective with populations of pupils with specific needs such as dyslexia, autistic spectrum disorders or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Opportunities for continuing professional development for teachers and other professionals have increased, and a broader research base has started to inform our understanding of the efficacy of various inclusive approaches. All of this should have led to major progress in respect of the development of inclusive classrooms, yet the statistics presented above would tend to suggest that whilst progress has been made we are now stalled somewhere beneath the summit of full inclusion.

## **INTERPRETING THE CURRENT STATE OF INCLUSION**

Earlier in this paper I urged some caution with regards to the ways in which we interpret the statistics extracted from official publications. The somewhat simplistic presentation of figures may be considered as an indication of the failure of schools to respond adequately to the challenge presented by pupils with special educational needs. It is apparent that a small percentage of the school population continues to be assessed as more suitable for placement in segregated provision, and that little progress has been made in enabling mainstream schools to address their needs. If we revisit Table 2, we can see that the percentage of pupils with statements of special educational needs attending segregated special schools has reached a plateau at around 36% (the combined figure for maintained and non-maintained schools). This has been taken as an indicator of limited progress during the period 2000 – 2004. However, if we refer again to the statistics provided by the same government department and examine the period from 1991 – 1995 we find that there was a dramatic decrease of statemented pupils attending special schools, from 56% - 43% and a similar increase from 40% - 54% attending mainstream provision. What we

have seen is a situation in which there has been a steady increase in the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schools over the past fifteen years but which has slowed down since the turn of the century.

### **Progress**

There may, of course, be several reasons for this but I would suggest that far from presenting a picture of limited success in terms of inclusion, when examined over a longer period, we gain the impression of an education system which has come far in addressing the challenges of providing for pupils with special educational needs. In addition to asking questions about why the population of special schools has remained static in recent years, it may be helpful to consider who the pupils are who make up this segregated population. Might it be that a significant number of those pupils who for many years found themselves in segregated provision have now joined mainstream school rolls, and that those who remain are pupils who have the most complex needs for which the mainstream school is not yet ready or equipped?

O'Brien (2001) has suggested that a problem may exist in respect of what he describes as "hard cases". Within this concept he describes three key factors, these being:

1. Hard case learners – testing the limits of inclusion at an individual learner level
2. Hard case teachers – testing the limits of inclusion at a classroom management level
3. Hard case systems – testing the limits of inclusion at an organisational level (p. 37)

### **Key Factors**

If we examine O'Brien's premise we can see that he raises issues which are critical in our interpretation of the current state of inclusion. His notion of hard case learners does not in any way apportion blame to pupils either as individuals or according to some form of imposed labelling. It does, however, imply that many of the pupils currently attending special schools are those who have either the most challenging behaviours or the most complex learning or medical needs and that for some of these, specialist provision may currently be the better alternative. If we examine the needs of pupils attending special schools in the UK and indeed in several other parts of Europe we can see that these schools have experienced a considerable shift of population. In a report of a working party commissioned to consider the future of special schools (DfES, 2003) it was acknowledged that:

*advances in medicine are allowing more children with complex health needs to survive well beyond school age; more children are being diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD); and there is a growing number of children with severe behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). (p. 7)*

These factors have inevitably influenced progress towards inclusion. As mainstream schools have begun to come to grips with a more diverse and complex range of pupil

needs, so have teachers in special schools been required to take similar measures to meet a change in their own clientele. Many mainstream schools who have shown themselves willing to rise to the increased challenges afforded by inclusion have acknowledged that they have needed to change their practices and are often working at the limits of their knowledge and skills. However, they persist and through their determination and commitment they succeed. It is, however, likely to be some time before all schools gain confidence in managing inclusion. In the meantime, it may be that special schools offer an important safety net for those pupils who might otherwise find themselves marginalised or excluded as a result of the challenges which they present.

When O'Brien (2001) refers to hard case teachers he is recognising that at present, not all teachers view the opportunity to work in an inclusive school with enthusiasm. Teaching through periods of change requires flexibility and an ability to adopt new procedures and to consider novel ideas. Whilst many have welcomed the change towards a more inclusive learning environment, there remain some who will challenge its validity and may resist change. It is, of course, easy to criticise such teachers, but we need to accept that some have genuine fears with regards to their own ability to manage a more challenging population, or that an increase in pupils with special educational needs in their classrooms may detract from their ability to teach others.

Here we must turn to O'Brien's third category hard case systems. Teachers and schools will move forward on inclusion only when they are confident that the necessary mechanisms, procedures and facilities are available to help them succeed. Education policy makers have done much to recognise the need to put into place systems to support inclusion. Professional development opportunities for teachers have improved, numbers of special needs assistants have increased and some authorities have developed focused initiatives to assist in the education of pupils with specific identified needs. This has enabled many teachers to gain increased confidence, skills and knowledge and to be able to teach all pupils within a system that affords support and improved resourcing.

## **CONCLUSION**

This is not to suggest that we can be complacent. If the small but significant number of pupils with special educational needs who continue to require segregated provision are to eventually be brought into the mainstream, there remains much to be done. At present we have stalled beneath the summit of inclusion. However, I would suggest that what we are witnessing is a pause for breath. Teachers and others in schools are consolidating the considerable progress made to date and embedding practices which, in the past, were seen as additional or remedial, but which are fast becoming the norm. We have come a long way on a journey towards understanding what works in inclusive classrooms. We need now to offer further support to teachers as they gain greater confidence in implementing these measures. Progress towards full inclusion may indeed be proving elusive, but during this period of consolidation I suggest we



take some time to celebrate the many achievements of teachers and schools who have brought us a great distance in a relatively short time.

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