

Accessing the Curriculum: A Case Study of Pupils with Special Educational Needs in a Mainstream Irish Primary School

The study described here investigated the extent to which pupils assessed as having special educational needs were accessing and participating in the mainstream curriculum alongside their peers in a large single-sex Irish primary school. It also explored the interrelationships between variables that impact on that participation, and identified strategies for and barriers to curricular integration.

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INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing national and international trend towards the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream settings. In Ireland, the *Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities* (1996) suggested that approximately 2.5% of the population in mainstream schools were pupils with various disabilities including pupils with physical, intellectual, emotional or sensory impairment (Glendenning, 1999). However, given the rapid increase in the appointment of resource teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) supporting pupils with SEN in Irish primary schools, it appears that a larger number of children is now acknowledged as having a disability.

However, school policy on SEN often focuses on administrative and organisational issues without addressing curriculum planning and modification (Costello, 1999). Additionally, recent Irish research reveals that there is little collaborative planning of curricular content for pupils with SEN or cooperative teaching in mainstream primary schools by class teachers and resource teachers, and instruction is often fragmented and uncoordinated (Harty, 2001; McCarthy, 2001). The *Primary School Curriculum* (Ireland, 1999) is being implemented, with teachers currently involved in in-service training and curriculum planning in specific subjects and in whole school planning. *The Draft Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2002) have been launched; and the passing into law of the *Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill* (Ireland, 2002) is imminent. The research project outlined here is, therefore, particularly timely.

CURRICULAR INTEGRATION

The issues of curriculum and integration have been part of the history of special education (Dyson, 2001) and continue to be of primary concern to mainstream class teachers, special education practitioners, pupils with SEN and their parents, perhaps even more so in an era of much change in education such as the increased enrolment of pupils with SEN in mainstream settings and the proposal of a staged approach to assessment, intervention and review in the area of special educational needs (Ireland, 2003).

Prior to the current move towards integration in Irish primary education, pupils with SEN were taught mainly in special schools where schools and teachers were responsible for developing an appropriate curriculum, focusing primarily on teaching basic skills. Traditional segregated special educational provision has been criticised for providing a narrow, restrictive and watered down curriculum, serving largely to reinforce the separateness of pupils with learning difficulties and to stigmatise them, concentrating mainly on immediate and observable rather than wider goals, frequently focusing on medical responses to specific disabilities, and often failing to meet individual needs (Clough, 1998; Lewis, 1995).

Alongside the upsurge in integration there exists a real tension between exposing pupils to the breadth and variety of curriculum content areas and developing key survival skills, which all pupils need to master. Integration in its fullest form means that students are working on the same “curricular activities at the same time, at the same place and with the same teacher” (Pijl & Meijer, 1991, p.102). This implies that the curricular breadth of the primary school is available to pupils with SEN, that they are engaged with the curriculum rather than merely exposed to it, and that achievements are recognised. The *Primary School Curriculum* (Ireland, 1999) facilitates modifications to meet SEN. It is spiral in nature, promoting revision, continuity and progression, and offers a menu style approach to content selection. It espouses the principles of outcomes-based education, respect for difference, constructivist learning, thematic learning, authentic assessment and co-operative learning, all of which acknowledge different learning rates, styles and levels. Curricular integration is influenced by many factors including teacher variables, classroom organisation and teaching strategies, rigidity of the prescribed curriculum, in-class support, whole school policy and individual pupil variables.

PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The focus of this inquiry was to describe and understand the curriculum experience of pupils with SEN in their natural context, and to discover the interrelationships between variables such as subject matter, individual pupil characteristics, types of accommodations made and teacher experience. The setting for the study was a large, single-sex Irish primary school. In an attempt to appreciate teaching and learning as nearly as possible as participants experience it, a range of data collection methods including a small-scale survey completed by 12 mainstream class teachers, interviews with five mainstream class teachers and 15 pupils with SEN, and classroom observations of eight pupils with SEN were used, providing a rich description while combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The pupil participants spanned the entire primary school range and included pupils with a wide range of special educational needs. Analysis of data identified a number of themes: teacher variables; pupil variables; curriculum content; participation in the curriculum; strategies and supports; and barriers to participation.

FINDINGS

Results of teacher questionnaires, pupil and teacher interviews, and in-depth classroom observations indicate that pupils with SEN can and do access and participate in the same curriculum as their peers with appropriate accommodations and supports. While these results should be interpreted cautiously, as they apply only in one particular

mainstream primary school in Ireland and only to the participants included in this project, they are important considering the rapidly increasing numbers of pupils with SEN now receiving their primary education in mainstream schools.

Teacher Variables

The teachers in the school chosen for this study have a variety of training in and experience of working with pupils with SEN, and are a natural resource to both new and experienced teaching colleagues. However, Anderson (1973) posits that teachers may be reluctant to seek advice from colleagues, in case they are perceived as incompetent. Evidence from this study supports McCarthy's (2001) finding that potential sources of advice and support such as teaching colleagues, inspectors, and visiting teachers are under-utilised. Clearly, a structured framework, as recommended in the *Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC)* (Ireland, 1993), with professionals from different disciplines employed in regional centres, is needed in the Irish context to facilitate collaboration and consultation among all professionals who support pupils with SEN. The provision in the *Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill* (Ireland, 2002) for a National Council for Special Education and the proposed collaborative drawing up of an individual education plan (IEP) for each pupil with SEN will address some of the difficulties identified in this study.

Curriculum Content

The comments of the teachers involved in this study support Corbett's (2001) contention that curriculum rigidity poses a barrier to including pupils with SEN in the same curriculum as their peers. Teachers reported that little focus is given to curriculum adaptation and differentiation in in-service training. One teacher, who has experience of working in a special school, mentioned the pressure to cover content matter, while teachers were also clearly concerned with the curriculum pressures in multi-grade classes.

While previous research reveals that in practice there is little evidence of differentiation (Forlin, 2001), qualitative data from this study supports the assertion by Clough (1998) that teachers do adapt teaching strategies to cater for differing needs. Where teachers were observed to be "coping with diversity, they did so as a 'natural' part of the teaching" (Visser, 1997, p. 37), through tactics such as frequent questioning, repetition, breaking tasks into smaller steps, working on the same concept at a different level and the use of concrete materials. While teachers rated differentiation in the form of amount of work completed, different worksheets and modified texts/materials as important strategies, it was not possible from the data collected to determine actual levels of differentiation by activity or output.

Participation in the Curriculum

Analysis of pupil interviews showed that pupils in this setting experience a wide range of curriculum content areas. The findings of this study in relation to specific areas of curriculum content are similar to previous research findings. High levels of participation in non-academic subjects reported by teachers reflect previous research findings (Gloesel, 1997). Qualitative data from both pupils and teachers support the findings of Kelly and Norwich (2002) and McLaughlin (2000) that maths is particularly difficult. Many of the difficulties identified are related to the hierarchical nature of the subject, and pupils struggling with complex concepts such as fractions and decimals when they have not mastered "foundational skills" (McLaughlin, 2000, p.30). While no

teacher nominated literacy as easily accessible, it is worth commenting that eight pupils perceived themselves as good at reading, spelling and/or handwriting, with one pupil stating that reading is his favourite subject. These findings in the current study are especially interesting considering the findings of Kelly and Norwich (2002) that pupils find literacy difficult, and of Jensen, cited in Gloesel (1997), that the levels of participation are low.

Pupil Characteristics and Teaching Strategies

Waldron and McLeskey (1998) contend that “Inclusion may work for *some* students with learning difficulties *some* of the time, it will not work for *all* of these students all of the time” (p. 396). Evidence from this study that pupils engage with the curriculum when teaching approaches are matched with individual needs supports this statement. For example, this researcher observed the effective provision of very structured activities for one pupil, and the use of a computer for written activities by another. The findings support the theory proposed by Lieberman (1996) that pupils with emotional and behavioural problems are difficult to include in the curriculum, and that pupils with similar levels of cognitive ability are able to access and participate in the curriculum alongside their mainstream peers. Teachers in this study felt that the increased emphasis on oral language across the curriculum (Ireland, 1999) facilitates participation, and nominated language and communication skills as impacting on participation. However, opportunities for oral language activities are reduced in split classes.

Review of the literature suggests that younger pupils are easier to accommodate within the mainstream curriculum, and the curriculum becomes more demanding with age (Cuckle, 1997). While qualitative data supports this theory and offers some insight into why this may be the case, quantitative data shows high levels of participation through all class levels. Much of the learning in the junior classes is activity based and thematic as recommended in the *Primary School Curriculum* (Ireland, 1999). This allows for engaging and meaningful learning activities and transfer of skills. However, evidence shows that in split classes and particularly at the senior end of the primary school, where teachers are under pressure to cover complex subject matter, there seems to be an over-reliance on whole class teaching and pencil and paper activities. This is consistent with the findings of Fishgrund (1990). Difficulties with textbook learning, identified in the literature (Cawley, Hayden, Cade, & Baker-Kroczyński, 2002), are confirmed by pupils’ comments:

Researcher: *Why is geography hard to learn?*

Pupil: *‘Cause I’m not good at reading it!*

The subjects identified by both pupils and teachers as being easily accessible are those in which pupils are actively involved in the learning process. This was confirmed during classroom observations. Those curriculum subjects considered particularly difficult rely heavily on textbooks and workbooks, which cause difficulties for pupils with SEN for a variety of reasons. Considering these findings in light of the principles of the curriculum, and Byers and Rose’s (1996) contention that learning must be meaningful if individual needs are to be met, teachers should reconsider the ways in which content is delivered, particularly in subjects and topics which lend themselves to interesting thematic work. Qualitative data shows awareness among teachers participating in this study of the importance of positive self-esteem for participation in inclusive settings (Ashdown, Carpenter, & Bovair, 1991), and its implications,

particularly for pupils with emotional and behavioural problems as they progress through the school.

Strategies and Supports

Evidence in both quantitative and qualitative data suggested that children provide support to their classmates with SEN through co-operative learning activities and peer tutoring as suggested in the literature (Colfer, Farrelly, Greal, & Smyth, 2001; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2001). However, co-operative learning opportunities in senior classes were confined mainly to project work and science activities. As proposed by Vaughn and Schumm (1995), teachers reported that pupils with SEN are seated next to pupils who perform well, and where this is the case peer tutoring happens spontaneously.

While teachers considered the presence of an SNA as very important, quantitative evidence in this study does not support Rose's (2000) contention that the presence of an SNA is a vital factor for curricular inclusion. Although observations of pupils supported by an SNA show that such support facilitated curricular integration, pupils not supported by an SNA also exhibited high levels of engagement with the curriculum. It was clear from interviews with the teachers concerned that organisation of the support was determined by the nature of individual needs of the pupil, and that both the class teacher and the pupil benefit from that support where it is present.

Barriers to Participation

Teachers were asked to rate from 1 to 5 (1 being very important) conditions that present barriers to participation in the curriculum. The table below shows that teachers consider class size as a major constraint (Mean=1.09), followed by time constraints (Mean=1.58), and multiple classes (Mean=1.64). Teachers also noted the importance of level of learning disability, collaboration with psychologist, support from home and pupils' feelings. While lack of information was not rated as important, it can influence teacher expectations (Anderson, 1973).

Conditions which present barriers to participation in the curriculum as reported by teachers (Using a rating scale of 1 to 5 with 1 indicating most important)

Condition	Mean
Class size	1.09
Time constraints	1.58
Multiple Classes	1.64
Individual pupil characteristics	1.75
Curriculum content	2.42
Lack of appropriate materials	2.58
Lack of information about particular disability	2.92

The significance of multiple classes and time constraints as impediments to including pupils with SEN in the class curriculum were further emphasised in interviews with teachers. Teachers spoke of a lack of time to adapt curriculum materials, to cover material missed while pupil(s) are working with resource and learning support teachers, to develop programmes with resource teachers, and of finding windows of opportunity to work individually with pupils with SEN. In classroom observations teachers were observed giving individual attention for periods of 3 minutes and 4 minutes each. All

five teachers interviewed mentioned the extra pressure on time in a mixed class situation.

Multiple Classes

Analysis of interview data shows that teachers (4/5) believe multiple grade classes have a negative impact on pupil participation in the curriculum. In addition to a reduction in the time available for individual help,

...the time I put into teaching...class maths, I could be putting into helping (pupil)...

teachers spoke of reduced time for oral work, extra curricular pressure, and the need for pupils to work more independently. It was felt that while pupils might benefit from inclusion in some of the lessons of the 'younger class group', this may have a negative impact on their self esteem. Two teachers believed that meeting the curricular needs of pupils with SEN is like teaching an extra class grouping.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The findings of this study have implications at all levels from micro- to macro-level, especially in light of the recent departmental circular (Ireland, 2003). The teachers in the context of this study willingly respond to the needs of a diverse student population as a natural part of their teaching, by adopting strategies and approaches that support the participation of pupils with SEN in the curriculum. However, the curricular integration of individual pupils is likely to break down unless more structured programmes of integration are espoused.

Educational change is not simply a top-down process, but requires problem solving at individual, school and local level. Implementation of recommendations such as collaborative planning, co-operative teaching and implementation of the *Draft Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities* (NCCA, 2002) at individual school level will bring about immediate changes which will impact directly on the curriculum experience of pupils with SEN. Although curricular integration is in its infancy in this country, the findings of this study should inform policy makers and curriculum planners in overcoming difficulties such as the need for in-service training in curriculum differentiation, collaborative IEP planning and the provision of non-contact time and material and human resources to facilitate greater levels of differentiation, and provide pupils with concrete experiences that make learning relevant and meaningful. With the enactment of the *Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill* (Ireland, 2002) imminent, this is an opportune time for the Department of Education and Science to provide the necessary professional and material resources to make curricular integration a reality for all pupils with SEN in mainstream Irish primary schools.

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