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Changing Provision for Pupils with Severe and Profound General Learning Disabilities in Ireland

The picture emerging from this study is that teachers working with children who have severe and profound general learning disabilities have a high level of personal satisfaction with their work. This indicates that they appear to be stimulated rather than demoralised by working with children whose progress is extremely slow. On the other hand, the conditions under which many teachers are expected to work are a major source of dissatisfaction and concern.

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INTRODUCTION

Anecdotal evidence has suggested that there is a relatively high turnover of teachers working with pupils who have severe and profound general learning disabilities (S&PLD) in Ireland. It was suggested that in many cases teachers lacked facilities and felt isolated from other educational personnel. There was however little hard data available about these issues and the possible relationship between them. This formed the impetus for the research presented here, in which teachers who were working or had worked with pupils with S&PLD were interviewed about their experiences (for a fuller account see Ware, McGee, & Julian, 2000).

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Apart from one early experiment in Cork in which the Department of Education funded a teacher to work with children with severe and profound general learning disabilities, prior to 1986, children with S&PLD (i.e. children with IQs below 30) were not provided with education in Ireland. Subsequent to the recommendations of a report on education and training for children with severe and profound mental handicap (Ireland, 1983), a pilot project was established. Twenty classes for pupils with S&PLD were set up attached to schools for pupils with moderate general learning disabilities (MLD) (i.e. children with IQs between 30 and 50). The pattern of provision which predominated was one in which the teacher worked alongside the health personnel who were already in place within a Developmental Day Centre (DDC), either by withdrawing individual children for teaching or by teaching individuals or small groups within the Activity Room. The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (Ireland, 1993) recommended that the pilot scheme should be extended to include all children with S&PLD and that the staff : pupil ratio should be increased to 1 teacher and two assistants to 6 children; it was initially set at one teacher to 12 pupils.

In the same year, Justice O'Hanlon ruled that Paul O'Donoghue, a boy with a profound level of general learning disability, was entitled to free primary education under the constitution. The

State did not however develop a clear and coherent strategy for providing education for this group of pupils and consequently, since 1995, educational provision for children with S&PLD has grown in very much an ad hoc manner. Recent figures from the Department of Education and Science (DES) indicate that around half the school age children in this group now have access to a teacher, but that many of those teachers are still working in premises which are not part of the school to which the class is attached (Ryan, 2000; H. Guinan, personal communication, 2001).

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Questionnaires

Principal teachers of all schools with provision for pupils with S&PLD were asked to complete two brief questionnaires, the first giving details of the provision attached to their school, and the second supplying information about the teachers currently working with pupils with S&PLD, and the current employment of teachers who had previously worked with these pupils.

Sample Selection

Teachers who had taught pupils with S&PLD for a minimum of two school years were deemed to be 'experienced teachers' for the purposes of the research, and those who had not taught for that long and were no longer still teaching the group were deemed to be 'less experienced teachers'. Thirteen teachers (10 + 3 reserves) were randomly selected from each group, and the first 10 teachers in each group were contacted and asked to participate. All ten experienced teachers approached agreed to participate. Of the ten less experienced teachers, one could not be traced and one was unable to find time to participate due to her current family circumstances. Two of the three reserves were therefore contacted, and agreed to participate.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used and topics were derived from the knowledge of issues repeatedly mentioned during discussions at induction courses for these teachers and from the relevant literature. The interview schedule was piloted with one experienced teacher. Interviews took place at a variety of locations, by mutual agreement between the participants and the interviewer. The majority of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed by the interviewer. Where recording was not possible (four cases) the interviews were written up from notes taken at the time.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved one 'experienced teacher' transcript being coded by two researchers, independently. The categories which emerged were then compared between the two researchers, and grouped under a number of superordinate headings. As a check on their applicability to both groups of teachers these categories were then applied to one less experienced teacher interview by both researchers. All other interview transcripts were then coded in the same way.

RESULTS

Overview of participants

Participants came from all areas of the country, with five being from the greater Dublin area (three experienced teachers and two less experienced teachers). In three cases an experienced teacher and a less experienced teacher who had worked in the same school were interviewed.

Few of the teachers had chosen to work with pupils with S&PLD and a number had taken the post because it offered the prospect of being made permanent at a time when teaching jobs were in very short supply.

Reasons for leaving/staying

The less experienced teachers' reasons for moving, and their comments on the conditions under which they would consider teaching pupils with S&PLD again in the future were enlightening. Several teachers considered that it was more difficult to juggle the demands of a young family when teaching pupils with S&PLD than with other classes. Two teachers had felt especially vulnerable when pregnant; one of these clearly felt unsupported by colleagues as no-one would take her class of pupils with challenging behaviour during this time. Less experienced teachers who were prepared to consider teaching pupils with S&PLD again in the future, would only do so if they were located in the main school building, with two classroom assistants and an adequate level of nursing cover. Furthermore, at least one who had moved within her own school had done so with very mixed feelings, and another would happily have returned to work with another group of pupils with S&PLD. In two of the cases where an experienced teacher and a less experienced teacher from the same school were interviewed, it was possible to identify potentially significant differences between them. In one case the less experienced teacher changed classes after the birth of her baby. In the second case, the experienced teacher was teaching in a spacious classroom with good access to other facilities, while the less experienced teacher worked in a small, first-floor room which made accessing other facilities difficult.

Working environment

This theme emerged strongly from the data, although no specific question was asked on this topic. This theme was divided into three strands: location of the class taught, facilities available, and teaching arrangements.

Location

Only six of the 20 teachers interviewed were teaching their group of six children all day in a classroom in the main school building; these were all experienced teachers. Of the other four experienced teachers, two were teaching children they considered needed constant medical supervision in a classroom located in a day care centre. They considered the availability of nursing cover in this situation to be a great source of support. Another experienced teacher was teaching in a well-equipped and spacious classroom in a developmental day centre, and the final one was working alongside nursing and care staff. All the less experienced teachers were working away from the main school. However, most were teaching their group of six children within a classroom situation. Additionally there had been some changes over time. One experienced teacher moved with her class from a daycare centre, two miles away, to a classroom within the main school building; another moved from a cramped classroom to a much more spacious one.

Facilities and teaching arrangements

Classrooms which were inappropriately small for the number of children and adults and the amount of bulky equipment to be accommodated were the main cause of dissatisfaction. Teaching arrangements reflected this issue, with some teachers taking only three of their six pupils at a time, and others working on a withdrawal basis.

SUPPORT

There are a number of sources of support for any individual in a potentially stressful job; these include colleagues and managers, access to training, formally constituted support groups, and outside work, friends and family.

Relationships with other staff

One of the more unusual aspects of the job of a teacher working with pupils with S&PLD is the number of other staff with whom they need to relate. In addition to the principal and teaching staff within the school, there are special needs support assistants, and potentially a whole range of therapists and other professionals. In addition many of the group were working alongside nurses and care assistants with whom they shared responsibility for children.

Colleagues working with pupils with S&PLD

Where there was more than one class for pupils with S&PLD within the school, teachers found their colleagues who worked with the same group of pupils a great source of support. In several instances teachers made efforts to formalise this support. Three experienced teachers mentioned meetings amongst the teachers' group for curriculum planning purposes.

The school principal

Some experienced teachers mentioned particularly supportive school principals. Examples of support included negotiating with the head of the daycare unit, and facilitating inclusion in school events. Not all principals were perceived to be supportive. Less experienced teachers mentioned issues such as principals who rarely visited the teachers in the daycare unit and being left out, or excluded from school events such as open days or religious events/ceremonies, eg. Confirmation.

Other teachers within the school

As many of the classes were not in the main school building, there was often little contact between the pupils with S&PLD, their teacher and the remaining teachers in the school. Both experienced teachers and less experienced teachers viewed most of their colleagues as reluctant to work with their pupils and sometimes as being uncertain about whether what they were doing was 'real teaching'.

Special Needs Assistants

Not all the teachers had two special needs assistants. Of the ten experienced teachers, only six had two special needs assistants; one teacher had an allocation equivalent to 1.5 assistants, two teachers had one assistant and one teacher had none. Many teachers mentioned the allocation of the second assistant as the most positive change which had taken place during their time working with pupils with S&PLD. However, some teachers found deploying several assistants in a cramped space problematic. A small minority of teachers had experienced problems in organising the work of assistants. However, in general, relationships with assistants seemed to be excellent; roles were generally clearly defined, the teachers valued their assistants and tried to ensure that they felt themselves to be part of an educational team.

Multi-Professional Relationships

Therapists

By no means did all classes have regular access to the services of the relevant therapists, and classes within a school building not on the same campus as health service provision seemed less likely to have adequate amounts of therapy time and nursing cover. Lack of speech

therapy provision and psychological services were a particular problem. In general relationships with therapists were good, and teachers reported that there was mutual appreciation of each other's areas of expertise. The input of psychologists was also generally reported to be constructive.

Health Service personnel

The majority of teachers who worked in health service settings reported tensions with nursing staff, either currently or in the past. These tensions often seemed to be focused around a lack of clear role differentiation and sometimes a belief on the part of nursing personnel that school was inappropriate for these children. In addition nurses were sometimes fearful for their job security and some teachers felt uncomfortable about being involved in this situation. Such tensions were sometimes exacerbated by a lack of confidence on the part of the teachers in their own professional role and by individual personality variables. However, by no means all relationships between teachers and nurses were tense, with some experienced teachers reporting that good relationships had developed over time.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING AND SUPPORT

Induction and Support Groups

All the teachers interviewed had taken an Induction course; all, except one, regarded the course as very useful. However, some had been working with children with S&PLD for several years before the course became available; currently a place on an Induction Course is available to all teachers of pupils with S&PLD within 12 months of their appointment.

Following the first two induction courses, an attempt had been made to establish regional support groups throughout the country. Only the Dublin Group continued to meet; they had organised both informal meetings and more formal courses for the teachers which were commented on very positively by the teachers who had been able to avail of them.

The Graduate Diploma in Advanced Studies in Special Education

The fact that teachers working in these classes had only recently become eligible to be considered for the Diploma Course in St Patrick's College, Dublin, meant that few had had any further specialised training. However, two teachers had taken the Diploma Course and were extremely enthusiastic about the way in which the course had enhanced their understanding.

Several of the teachers mentioned the difficulty of accessing further specialist training and one experienced teacher explicitly stated that she felt that a specialist training for working with this particular group of pupils was what was required (in preference to a generic course), and this accorded with similar views expressed by some other experienced teachers during a 'top up' course taken three or four years after they had attended an Induction course.

Availability of Curriculum Guidelines

A number of the interviewees mentioned the lack of curriculum guidelines for this group, and stressed the need for such guidance to support their work. One experienced teacher had expected such guidelines to be given at the Induction course.

CONCLUSION

The picture emerging from this research is of teachers who generally enjoy teaching the

children with whom they work, but for whom working conditions and the level of support they receive are crucial to their job satisfaction.

In many ways this is surprising, as teachers are stimulated rather than demoralised by working with children for whom progress is extremely slow, and for whom every step represents a quite inordinate effort on the part of their teachers. Although they see their job as perhaps the most difficult in teaching, the rewards to be gained from what the children achieve are seen to outweigh the costs.

On the other hand, the conditions in which the teachers are expected to work are a major source of dissatisfaction and demoralisation. The majority of teachers do not have a suitably equipped classroom for their class and/or are not situated within the main school building. Some share rooms with nurses on health service premises. Not all had the two special needs assistants allocated to their class working with them.

Being located away from the main school building leads many of the teachers to feel isolated. This feeling of isolation is exacerbated by the apparent reluctance of some principal teachers to include them and their pupils in important school events, giving a distinct impression that these classes are not really part of the school. The perceived separateness of these classes appears to create a vicious circle whereby many of the teachers in the school have little contact with pupils with S&PLD, are uncertain as to how (or whether) they can be taught, and view being asked to take on such a class with apprehension at best.

The need for curriculum guidance mentioned by a number of the teachers is already being addressed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and when this is available it should prove supportive to teachers new to the field.

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