Inclusion-fact or fiction: Young people with physical disabilities speak about their post primary schooling.

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1

Introduction

Recent international discussion in relation to the appropriate school placement for students with disabilities has been dominated by the 'integration' debate. Ireland has witnessed a similar debate. It is clear that within Ireland and internationally that the integration issue has often become polarised into circular arguments about the efficacy of special schools in comparison to their mainstream counterparts. Increasingly it has been recognised that this type of discussion can become a futile exercise unless the educational and social needs of the individual child becomes the central focus of the debate. Research has tended to focus on investigating the efficacy of integration from the viewpoint of teachers, policy makers and schools. With some notable exceptions (Allan,1999, Moore, Beazley & Maelzer, 1998) the experiences of the young people with disabilities who have been integrated into mainstream schools are rarely canvassed or documented. This is equally true within Irish education. This research is an attempt to redress the balance. Young people with disabilities (primarily physical) were asked to address their experiences of curriculum access within post primary schools (Kenny et al., 2000).

The Irish situation

Until comparatively recently, within Ireland and internationally, children with disabilities were educated according to the categorical definition of their disability in separate settings isolated from their mainstream peers. Gradually, the education system began to recognise that children with particular types of disability (primarily physical/sensory) could be successfully educated alongside their mainstream peers. There was an increased awareness that a disability constituted a specific attribute rather than a whole definition of the person. This insight, often reinforced by legislation and court rulings, resulted in children with disabilities not being automatically excluded from mainstream provision.

Within Ireland, disability issues have achieved greater prominence in the 1990's through a combination of high profile court cases and a belated government response in the shape of a series of reports including the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) *Report* (1993), the Report of the Government Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, *A Strategy for Equality* (1996), and the NCCA Discussion Document (1999), *Special Educational Needs: Curriculum Issues.* Most significantly, the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996) adopted a social model of disability, advocated responses from a 'civil rights perspective', and recognised that 'equality is a key principle of the human rights approach' (p. 8). In addition to these developments the *1998 Education Act* provides a statutory basis for legislation, policy and practice in relation to all education provision. The Act provides a level of principled commitment to equity in relation to students with disabilities however it singularly fails to provide concrete proposals to ensure the full inclusion of young people with disabilities within mainstream education.

The limited research on inclusive practice for young people with disabilities in Ireland makes it extremely difficult to provide a detailed overview. The parallel nature of mainstream and special education has inhibited the systematic development of models

2

of inclusive practice. Schools' link programmes involving pupils from mainstream and special schools in shared curricular activities constitute one example of partial integration that developed from local initiatives (Shevlin and O' Moore, 2000). Due to the limited research base it is difficult to ascertain the experiences of young people with disabilities within integrated settings. O'Keeffe's study (1997) is a notable exception as it documents the mainstream school careers of young people with a sensory disability in Ireland. The difficulties reported by young people in gaining curricular access in that particular study parallel those documented in the study under review. In the absence of research data there has been an assumption that the inclusion of young people with physical disabilities within mainstream provision has been unproblematic. Results from the following study would indicate that this is a facile assumption that must be challenged.

Methodology

A small-scale exploratory study was designed to record the experiences of young people with primarily physical disabilities in Irish post-primary schools. Young adults with disabilities who had recently completed post primary schooling were targeted for research. A qualitative approach was adopted that employed a group format for interviews. This involved a discourse analysis of transcripts of semi-structured, taped interviews. Sixteen young people (six male, ten female) with a variety of disabilities, principally physical, participated in the study. The majority of participants (eleven) were from urban backgrounds while a minority (five) had rural origins. Based on the work of a number of authors (Beresford, 1997, Moore, Beazley & Maelzer 1998, Lewis and Lindsay, 2000) research procedures were devised which attempted to respect and validate the experiences of young people with disabilities.

The interview procedure consisted of two distinct phases. Initially the research team developed a topic checklist based on issues identified in current literature. These issues were explored with the participants in the first interview and opportunities were provided for the young people to identify other salient issues of particular concern to themselves.

An interim statement of findings based on the first interviews was compiled and at the beginning of the second phase of interviews participants were invited to assess the adequacy/inadequacy of these findings as a representation of their views. This critique provided the context for the second set of interviews where participants were invited to expand on these initial findings.

Within this paper it is proposed to examine three aspects of participant access to schooling; initial and ongoing school access, the influence of teacher expectations on curricular access, participation in extra-curricular activities.

3

Access to school

Participants appeared to utilise similar criteria to other young people in choosing a second-level school. These criteria included friends' choices, parental preference and proximity:

> *Most of my friends were going to that school. It was nice being with the normal crowd. It was just around the corner and I liked it and I put my name down, that's how I got to go there.*

So, enrolment was straightforward for most participants. However, getting around in the built environment of the school was often difficult, and frustrated their full participation in vital aspects of school life:

> *Prefabs were a big problem, big steps into them, I had to be lifted. If my friends weren't around I wouldn't get there. I wouldn't go to the class.*

It was clear that without peer support physical access to class was not guaranteed for these participants. Compounding the physical difficulties, participants often felt that asking for help could have an adverse effect on interactions with peers:

> *Asking for help, I found that difficult. I didn't like asking the same person all the time ... Some people would make a fuss over me and others wouldn't think – it was a mixture of reactions.*

The struggle to gain basic access was ongoing and sometimes it was ultimately unsuccessful:

> *You had to fight. One girl had spina bifida. She couldn't handle the crowds; there were 1200 in the school. She left.*

So, inclusion in the life of the school was a far more complex process than the simple achievement of enrolment and physical presence.

Expectations

Teacher expectations, positive and negative, had a significant impact on students' perceptions of their own capability and of the opportunities available to achieve their potential. Positive teacher responses encouraged and empowered participants to become fully involved in curricular activities:

> *One teacher kept driving me the whole way. Kind of 'put it in a context, fair enough you have a disability but - throw it away from you and continue on' like. From that day on I've never looked back. It was the best thing ever that, to stand up for ourselves.*

> *Some did their best to accommodate you with notes and extra time for essays to be handed up.*

However, many participants found that teachers had lower expectations with regard to their academic ability; they had experienced *global categorisation* (taking one facet of the person – his/her disability – as defining the whole person):

4

There was an attitude that if you have something wrong with you, you don't have to reach the same standards others do.

If I didn't do my homework they wouldn't really mind.

Particular subject areas that required substantial adaptation - such as Science, Home Economics or Physical Education – were the source of both positive and negative experiences for the participants. Some schools encouraged and facilitated inclusion through positive expectations and employing peer support:

[In Science classes] we'd pair up, and my partner used to do all the physical work. I just couldn't do it; I couldn't hold a glass of water.

I wasn't excluded from any sports. Actually they pushed me into things more than taking me out – 'you are going into this, no questions asked!.

However, for other participants inclusion in the curricular activities alongside their peers was not an option:

In science, using things on the bench, I just sat down and watched.

I think most of us were excluded especially in sports - the school wasn't equipped to cope. They tried, but the majority of times you had to stay out.

Extra curricular activities

Access to extra curricular activities was not guaranteed; a wide range of school responses was evident. However, note in the first extract below, the school's policy was positive but inadequate;

I went on lots of trips. The other students had to make their own way, we got transport no problem from school. Everybody had to do the school musical. I found I actually enjoyed it and it was one of the things I could be involved in. Then in Transition Year there were a lot of activities like swimming and trips, they wouldn't let me do for insurance reasons. I was excluded from my groups as far as going out with the class - I think they were nearly afraid I would hurt myself.

This inconsistency in school policy, obviously influenced by an overly protective approach, heightened the sense of exclusion experienced by the participant.

Other schools appeared to make little effort to facilitate participation in extra curricular activities for their students with disabilities; this type of experience could engender a sense of painful isolation:

They didn't make an effort to think about it when it came to trips. Most times we couldn't go.

I would listen to them when they came back – 'you missed a great couple of days we'd great fun'. Even sitting beside them hearing them laughing, it was laughing at something you didn't understand. I didn't like that.

Discussion

This brief review of participants' accounts of their second-level schooling indicates that they encountered positive and negative in their experiences of the built environment, curriculum access, and school life.

Participants endeavoured to be 'normal' - to attend school on the same basis as their peers - but most experienced isolation in their struggle to gain full access to the physical, social and academic aspects of school life. The need to ask for help inhibited the development of peer relationships and often skewed those relationships towards dependency. Academic progress was inextricably linked to curriculum access, and both were shaped by insight and oversight in local school provision. Subjects that involved practical work posed particular difficulties for many participants. School practice varied considerably. In some schools, access was ensured through minor adaptations or the utilisation of co-operative learning strategies, but in others participants were reduced to the role of observers. Being included in extra curricular activities was not an automatic entitlement either. Some schools and teachers made every effort to include participants while others appeared to believe that this was not essential to school life for young people with disabilities. This type of exclusion made participants extremely conscious of their 'difference' (Allan, 1999).

Schools and teachers were generally ill prepared for full inclusion. Participants encountered teachers who accepted lower standards for their work and whose negative expectations appear to be based on outdated, medicalised notions of disability (Cornwall, 1997, Thomas, Walker & Webb, 1998). These teachers' relationships with disabled students were shaped by whether they perceived the disability as wholly defining that person or as just one of her/his attributes. Empowering teachers, on the other hand, facilitated students with extra tuition, notes, encouragement and guidance. Most adaptations were devised by individual teachers, and lacked theoretical or philosophical underpinning (Cornwall, 1997, Florian, 1998).

Concluding comments

Given the obvious lack of systemic support for local school and/or teacher initiatives there was a real danger that over time this support could become diluted or disappear (Garner, 2000, Vlachou, 1997). Little if any attention seemed to have been given to developing policy and provision that ensured access for students with disabilities, not just to the building but to mutually respectful, empowering staff-student and peer relationships, and to curricular and extra-curricular activities – the building blocks of school life for all students.

The findings of this project reinforce the outcomes of international research relating to inclusive schooling (Strangvik, 1997, Stukat, 1993, Thomas et al., 1998, Vlachou, 1997). Systemic support is urgently needed to create the conditions necessary for the full inclusion of young people with disabilities. In the absence of this, ad hoc arrangements have become the norm and each student with a disability is expected to adjust.

The insights generated in this project came from direct consultation with young disabled people. Their voices must be heard, to ensure that future policy and practice in relation to inclusive school provision is adequate and appropriate. Only then will young people with disabilities be empowered to fully participate in life in school and after.

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