

## **Integration: Attitudes of Children in Mainstream Education towards their Peers in Special Classes**

**In a study of 114 children in ordinary primary schools in Ireland, attitudes of pupils towards their peers with special needs in special classes were examined. Results show that neither very strong positive nor negative attitudes are in evidence; nor is there a clear indication of a negative stereotype. Children in special classes, the study indicates, are not viewed as a homogeneous grouping by their peers in regular classes and allowances are made for individual differences.**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Principle five of the recommendations of the Report of the Special Education Review Committee (1993) states that: "Except where individual circumstances make this impracticable, appropriate education for all children with special needs should be provided in ordinary schools."

The White Paper on Education (1995), in setting out Department of Education Policy, endorses the principles of the SERC Report and a special task force has been set up within the Department to implement its findings. Evidently, for an increasing number of children with special needs, educational provision will now be made in mainstream schools. The current most favoured placement is the 'special class', a term used to denote a specific grouping of children with special needs within an ordinary school (McGee, 1990). In 1993 there were 192 special classes, with 155 of these catering for pupils with mild mental handicap (Ireland, 1993).



## **INTEGRATION: A CHALLENGE TO SCHOOLS**

Research generally highlights the challenges which integration initiatives present to various groups, namely, educators, teachers, support personnel, parents, and to pupils with special needs. Much of the literature focuses on the existence of a negative stereotype and the ensuing problems that people with disabilities have to face. Children in special classes were found to have difficulty in being accepted by their mainstream peers (Stone and La Greca, (1990) and in forming and maintaining social relationships (Hazel and Schumaker, 1988). While these authors were writing about children with specific learning difficulties in special classes - a different population to that of this study - their findings are informative in the context of the integration debate.

The findings presented in this study, although more optimistic than Hazel and Schumaker, would suggest that there is still a challenge to children in mainstream classes. Most special classes in mainstream schools are composed of children who have been assessed as functioning within the range of mild mental handicap. With the establishment of special classes, many pupils in ordinary schools are faced, for the first time, with the possibility of sharing their school and even their classroom with peers who have special needs; they are asked to form and maintain social relationships with them and to integrate them into the life of the school.

This they are asked to do, in spite of the fact that by the time they meet their peers with special needs in a mainstream setting their attitudes have already taken root. Children in the mainstream are products of a society which, traditionally, has shunned people with special needs, often treating them as lesser beings and second class citizens. In essence, children in the mainstream are asked to transcend the fictional identities which society has commonly ascribed to people with special needs,

In this study, the attitudes of 114 mainstream children towards their special class peers are examined. The data presented shows that in the target mainstream school, children in special classes are, by and large, perceived to be similar to children in mainstream classes; there is evidence of neither a very strong positive nor negative attitude towards them and a negative stereotype does not exist. The research also suggests that the children in the special class in this integrated setting are not viewed as a homogeneous group by their regular class peers but allowances are made for individual differences.



## **INTEGRATION AND GROUP AFFILIATION**

Central to the integration debate is the concept of group affiliation. Research into intergroup relations lends support to the belief that if integration moves are to be effective, pupils in special classes should be viewed as an integral part of the whole school in-group. Brown (1989) talks of the concept of 'we-ness' and 'they-ness' which implies an association with others. As individuals, we delineate who we are and tend to claim membership of the in-group, while others are consigned to the out-group on the periphery.

## **STIGMA AND INTER-GROUP RELATIONS**

Consequently, the quality of intergroup relations is determined in part by the perception each group has of the other. Since we each thrive on a positive self concept, it follows that the in-group will perceive itself as superior to the out-group. In this way status disparity is established and negative attributes are ascribed to the outgroup in an effort to satisfy one's need to maintain an adequate level of self esteem (Bagley et al, 1979). It follows that categorisation of persons as member of one's own in-group or of the opposing out-group has a consequential effect on a broad range of social behaviours.

Conventionally, people with special needs were treated as members of an out-group. Society tended to focus on their difference from the norm and responded to their needs in terms of their categorical group membership rather than their uniqueness as individuals. The use of categorical labels aids the formation of stereotypes and negative labelling connotes deviation from the cultural norm. Deviant groups are compared unfavourably to the rest of so-called normal society. As Scrambler (1991) comments, a substantial risk then exists that one's own identity may well be 'spoiled' through the stigmatisation which frequently arises from the use of negative labelling.

## **SIMILARITY FACTOR AND CONTACT**

Incorporated in the ingroup/outgroup debate is the theory which holds that the differences which children perceive between their own characteristics and those of their peers with special needs will create negative attitudes. Authors such as Bak and Siperstein (1989) adopt this Cognitive Consistency theory and maintain that children without special needs will respond more favourably if the emphasis is taken away from the obvious differences between the two groups and placed instead on their existing affinities.



Thus, while contact between the two groups is assured through the establishment of special classes in mainstream schools, it cannot be concluded that contact alone would guarantee positive attitudes. Opportunities for learning about disabilities may swell prejudice as easily as diminish it. In effect, special class placements, while presenting an opportunity to modify positively social attitudes, also carry the risk of making things worse if intervention strategies to minimise perceived differences are not put in place.

## **SURVEY RESULTS**

Against this backdrop, a survey was undertaken in a primary school with special classes to elicit a statement of attitude from mainstream classes towards their peers in these classes. In the target special class, the ages of the children ranged from nine to fifteen years. While the majority of them were of average height and build, some (c.20%) were considerably smaller and of slighter build than their same-age peers in mainstream classes. All of the special class children had significant learning difficulties. The degree of learning difficulty ranged from mild (50%) to moderate (16.65%). The remaining children (33.35%) were described as functioning in the mild/moderate range. These descriptions correlate roughly with the categories of mild (I.Q. 50-70) and moderate (I.Q. 30-50) mental handicap. All children were considerably behind their same-age peers in reading and mathematical skills. Seven children (58%) had motor problems and six (58%) had language difficulties. Nine children (66.6%) had poor social skills. Of these, two were described as aggressive and another three were excessively timid. One child was physically disabled and used a walking aid.

A comparison was made between the respondents' view of themselves and of the target special class under three headings - Perceived Similarity, Stereotype and Stated Attitude.

### **SECTION ONE: PERCEIVED SIMILARITY**

This section aimed to ascertain whether the children in mainstream classes view themselves as essentially different from their same-age peers in the special class. From a list of thirty-six items children were asked to indicate those that were important to themselves; then from a similar list to indicate those they deemed important to the children with special needs. The wording of the statements was decided after a pilot questionnaire was administered to 465 primary school pupils.



**TABLE 1: Factors Recording Greatest Similarity**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
To be loved	104	91.2
To have loving parents	103	90.4
To have fun	102	89.5

By and large the respondents indicated that the target population was similar to themselves. On a scoring scale of 0-36 (where 0 = the same and 36 = different) a mean score of 11.9 was recorded. Frequency distributions of the thirty-six individual variables identified those factors which, according to the responses, were considered most common to both the respondents and to the special class pupils (Table 1). These are: to be loved, to have loving parents, and to have fun. The factors where least similarity was perceived were: to go to town by myself, to be allowed to go to discos, and to be best at something at school (Table 2).

**TABLE 2: Factors Recording Least Similarity**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
To be best at something	64	56.1
To be allowed to go to discos	56	49.1
To go to town by myself	51	44.7

The results here confirm that the need for security and to have fun has no boundaries in that these are deemed important for both groups.



**TABLE 3: ANOVA FOR AMALGAMS (R), (S), AND (E)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Group Variation</b>
Responsibility (R)	3.167	3.751
Social Relationships (S)	2.125	2.355
Excellence (E)	2.765	3.142
Total	2.686	
F = 10.21	P = 0.0001	

A more precise analysis of the sameness variable highlights areas within which a greater degree of difference is perceived. Various items were combined to give three amalgams, namely Ability to take Responsibility, Need for Social Relationships and Excellence.

Greatest similarity was recorded in the area of Need for Social Relationships while most difference was recorded in the areas of Responsibility and Excellence (Table 3). For the children in the special class it was considered less important that they be well educated, be able to read well, that they do well in school tests, or win at competitions. All of these items were amalgamated under the heading of Excellence. In the area of Ability to take Responsibility, it was less important for these children to get a job when they grow up, to be trusted by adults or to be able to do things on their own.

### **ANALYSIS**

However, an in-depth analysis of the results reveals that on a scoring scale of 0-36 (where 0 = the same and 36 = different), a mean score of 11.39 was recorded. Therefore, this part of the study reveals no statistically significant difference between the respondents' view of themselves and of their peers in special classes. Factors which might have affected the results, age, gender, and contact in particular (Table 4), were found not to be significant even though many of the respondents had interacted with children from the special class in integrated Art or PE classes.



**TABLE 4: ANOVA FOR DIFFERENCE BY CONTACT**

<b>Contact</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Group Variance</b>
0	10.89	72	52.24
1	11.64	42	66.38
Total	11.17	114	
F = 0.26		P = 0.6093	

This result suggests that integrated classes should be directed more specifically in order to maximise their potential as a vehicle for challenging negative attitudes. Prior to the commencement of the integrated classes, pupils in the mainstream might be asked to consider their own attitudes to the joint venture through role play or through the use of "counterexamples" (Gash, 1992). Through guided discussion, the children would come face to face with some of their own prejudices and the ensuing classes would present an opportunity to have these challenged or affirmed. During integrated classes, displays of the group's work would draw attention to the fact that it is not necessarily the children in the mainstream classes who perform best in Art, Music or P.E. Thus, perceived difference from the norm could be minimised.

Obviously, integration as it is practised in the target primary school has gone some way towards minimising the perceived differences between the groups and lends support to the supposition that perceived similarity has a positive effect on attitude (Bak & Siperstein, 1987).

## **SECTION TWO : STEREOTYPES**

The literature suggests that a negative stereotype of the pupils in a special class would exist. This section sets out to test this hypothesis by asking the respondents to chose from a matrix of 13 descriptions with 5 degrees of positivity/negativity. Again, in order that the language be user-friendly, the terminology used was compiled through a survey of the type of vocabulary children use when describing either someone they like or do not like.

Only in four areas are the pupils in the special class rated more negatively. These are: Cleanliness, Cleverness, Popularity and Intelligence. In the areas of



Meanness and Wildness they are perceived more positively. The score ranges from 13 which indicates a very negative stereotype, to 65 indicating a very positive stereotype. For the special class, a mean score of 38 was recorded while that for the mainstream class was 50.

**TABLE 5: PAIRED T TEST FOR REGULAR AND SPECIAL CLASS**

Mean	T Score	DF	P
11.17	15.79	113	0.0000

Additional evidence from a stem and leaf plot of the responses indicates that a far wider range of views is held of the special class which suggests that allowance is being made for individual differences among the children in the special class (Table 5). Overall, the respondents did not commit to any stereotype of the pupils in the special class. Interestingly, they were prepared to indicate a fairly positive stereotype of themselves.

### **SECTION THREE: ATTITUDES**

In this final section the children were asked to give their reactions to a hypothetical situation involving the pupils in the special class. In this way a statement of attitude was sought. The respondents were asked to imagine how they would react if their same-age peers in the special class were to join their mainstream class on a permanent basis.

Frequency distributions of the responses suggest that in general, they would smile at their new classmates, they would not ignore them at breaktimes, and they would be disconcerted if others made fun of them. They would not be upset if the new pupils wanted to sit beside them in class. It is interesting to note that while most would be happy to have their peers with special needs in their classroom, only 30% stated that these children should be in a mainstream class (Table 6). In de-briefing the children after doing the survey, they explained that children in the special class would get more help in their own class because of the better pupil-teacher ratio there.



**TABLE 6: CHOICES REGARDING PLACEMENT.**

<b>Placement</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Special School	23	20.2
Special Class	78	68.4
Mainstream Class	35	30.7

(The questionnaire admitted the possibility that more than one placement option might be chosen.)

However, not all responses were so positive and there seems to be a limit to the degree of acceptance offered. For example, a majority of children reported that in an integrated class they would not pick their peers with special needs for a quiz team, they would keep secrets from them and they would feel angry if they did not keep the rules of their games.

Two questions received a particularly high proportion of negative responses. Seventy-three percent stated that they would not invite any of the children from the special class to their houses and 61% stated that they would not make any of the children with special needs their best friend.

Overall, the result of this section indicates that neither a strong positive nor a strong negative attitude exists towards the children in the special class. In effect, the respondents were prepared to integrate with their peers with special needs at a locational and social level inside school. They were not prepared to interact with them at a functional level outside school. An apparent dichotomy exists between this and earlier responses to the accepted need of the students in the special classes to have social relationships. Further probing revealed that the respondents perceived a negative attitude among their own parents, thus curtailing any desired social contact outside school.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In general, in the target school, pro-social attitudes exist towards the children in the special class. The children are not perceived to be significantly different from their peers in mainstream classes. They are not viewed in a negative, stereotypic way, and they are not subjected to social isolation or indifference.



From this study, it appears that although the special class is not perceived as completely belonging to the whole school in-group, the demarcation lines between the majority and minority groups are not rigidly defined. There is a danger that the term 'special class' might act as a *de facto* label which could assist in setting those children apart from the in-group. Consideration might be given to renaming the class in keeping with existing practices in the mainstream, where classes are named according to the teacher assigned. The solidarity expressed by the children in mainstream classes with their peers in the special class would thus be harnessed.

In various subject areas, many mainstream teachers use "pairing" and "buddy" systems which might also act as beneficial intervention strategies in an integrated setting. Children who are competent, for example, in reading or problem-solving work with a less able child, at the latter's pace. This approach may not suit all children, but for those who are patient and empathetic, the system provides for monitored peer interaction while fostering good working relationships and collective responsibility for group morale. The altruism present in the children in mainstream classes could be fostered and thus assist them in their challenge to transcend the fictional identities of their peers in special classes.

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