Inclusion and its Implementation in a Rural Primary School in Ireland

This study examines how the concept of inclusion in the Irish education system works in practice. Through the use of an inclusion audit, the attitude of teachers and pupils in a rural primary school towards inclusion were surveyed. This small scale study reports the findings of this audit and discusses the barriers to inclusion identified in the survey and their impact on inclusive practices.

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INTRODUCTION

"Education is either part of the solution or part of the problem" (Tormey, 2003, p.1). Nowhere is this more relevant than in the area of inclusive education. In a society, which is faced with the challenge of becoming truly inclusive, education has an intrinsic role to play to ensure that this challenge is seen not as an obstacle but as an opportunity. This article shall examine the question of how inclusive an Irish primary school is and various recommendations will be proposed as a means of making the school more inclusive.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Inclusion is a complex, multifaceted concept which has generated much debate in education (Henry, Casserly, Coady and Marshall, 2008). It is essential however, that inclusion is recognized as relating to all children and not just those with special educational needs (SEN) (UNESCO, 1994; Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw, 2010). Inclusion is about ensuring that the educational needs of all children, regardless of differences, are met in an environment of mutual respect and understanding. It is this focus on acceptance which is perhaps the biggest ideological shift in inclusion as it signals the move away from the deficit or medical model of education towards a social model. The move towards inclusive education in Ireland took place for a variety of reasons, most notably legislation and litigation (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008). Central to this transformation

was the *Special Education Review Committee* (SERC) report (DES, 1993) which outlined seven principles for the future development of Irish education. Included in these was the view that the needs of the child are the paramount consideration and that appropriate education should take place within ordinary schools except where individual circumstances make this impossible. This right to inclusion was enshrined in the Education Act 1998 (Government of Ireland, 1998) "where the right of parents to send their child to a school of their choice is emphasised" (MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007, p. 294). The *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs* (EPSEN) Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) continues this theme by expanding the legislative framework for inclusive education.

While many barriers to inclusion remain in the Irish system, Ireland has gone through a radical change away from the segregation of pupils with SEN towards a more inclusive system. In 1989, all children with Mild General Learning Disabilities attended either a special school or a special class; by 2007 this number had decreased to 36% (Stevens and O'Moore, 2009). While this suggests the increasing inclusion of children with SEN it also raises the question – is inclusion merely about location?

Locational and Educational Inclusion
The movement of inclusion from a theory to a practice raises several, often competing views on how it should be implemented. It is essential for the development of inclusion that we do not fall into the trap of viewing it purely as a geographical question. Ryan maintains it "is more than a place" (2009, p.77). It is about ensuring the best possible holistic education for the child; it is about the child feeling they belong (Warnock and Norwich, 2010).

Inclusion is such an emotive and important social rights issue that the educational concerns involved can be forced to the background (Meegan and MacPhail, 2006; Henry et al., 2008). Rather than concentrating on location the focus should be on how to best meet the needs of the child (King, 2006).

Definition of Inclusion
Inclusion is a difficult concept to characterize (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). Booth and Ainscow define it as "increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula and communities of local schools" (2002, p. 3). This definition reflects the idea of the 'freedom to' and 'freedom from' (Berlin, 1988). The child is free from exclusive practices and free to develop in an inclusive environment. The emphasis moves from minimizing a disability to maximising potential and viewing diversity as a resource.

SCHOOL SURVEY

The study described here was carried out in a primary school located in rural east Galway. At the time of the study 85 pupils were enrolled and there were six teachers: four classroom teachers, a shared learning support teacher and a shared resource teacher. Three of the class teachers had previously worked in either a learning support or resource role in the school. Six per cent of pupils qualified for resource hours, 21% attended learning support in English and 14% received learning support in mathematics. The school did not have any children from an ethnic minority, nor did any of the pupils have English as an additional language. The mission statement of the school aims "to cultivate a safe, caring environment so that each child's unique gifts and capabilities will be developed".

The school staff completed the inclusion audit in October 2011. In it they were asked to rate the school's inclusiveness under a range of headings and to identify any barriers they encounter. The results were analysed, with particular attention to areas where the staff felt that the school was performing less well. Also, the fifth and sixth class pupils were surveyed to discover their views on how inclusive their school was. These "insider voices", as Ballard refers to them (Shevlin, Kenny and McNeela, 2002, p.161), offer a different perspective on school inclusion. An outline of the main findings and identified barriers follows.

A questionnaire survey was used to complete the inclusion audit. The survey contained twenty closed questions which were grouped under the headings of inclusive cultures, policies and practices. A Likert rating scale quantified teacher attitude to inclusion and their school's practices (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). For each question the teachers completed two five point scales examining what the staff felt should be happening and what was actually happening. The scales ranged from 1 should not be happening/is not happening to 5 should be happening/ is happening. The two scales were used in order to assess how, in the teachers' view, actual practices compared to the school's vision or ideal. In an attempt to understand the nuanced complexity of the participants' views, qualitative elements were included. Teachers were given scope to identify barriers to inclusion and examples of how the staff created an inclusive environment. Such open ended elements help to elicit the respondents' "categorical worldview" and allow for a clearer grasp of, what are complex concepts **(**Quinn Patton, 2015, p 445).

In the section on inclusive cultures the teachers were asked to respond to statements about how the school integrates pupils with SEN and how the staff collaborate both internally and with parents. The school enrolment criteria, how

support is provided, how accessible the school is and teachers' familiarity with the school's policies were dealt with under inclusive policies. In the final section on inclusive practices, opinions in relation to teaching methodologies used, the school's relationship with relevant outside agencies and the system of assessment, selection and communication were sought from the staff.

FINDINGS FROM THE INCLUSION AUDIT

Teachers' and Pupils' Perspectives
A school culture has an intangible quality which forms the basis for everything that occurs in the school. It is from this culture that practice and policy both arise and develop (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). The staff felt that the school was inclusive and that they collaborated well with each other and with parents. The pupil population, while having a variety of individual educational needs, was not regarded by the staff as being diverse, with one teacher outlining how "all the children" are "from the locality and would all have similar backgrounds". Inclusion was seen primarily as a locational issue with staff regarding the school as inclusive because "everyone is welcome to come here". The findings highlighted an interesting difference between what the teachers felt should be happening and what was actually happening in several areas. Collaboration amongst pupils, whether parents and teachers shared the same expectations and whether the pupils with additional needs had high expectations of themselves all showed up as areas of concern for the staff. If a school is to be inclusive it is essential that parents and staff understand each other's viewpoint and are working towards the same goal (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). While the amount of collaboration was also identified by pupils as a concern, the majority believed they worked well together in class. The staff's perception that the pupils' self-esteem was not at a desired level was validated by the number of pupils who felt they were not doing well at school. The results highlighted that while the staff felt the school provided locational inclusion it faced challenges to ensure the pupils felt socially and educationally included.

The findings from the pupil survey suggested that less than half the pupils were happy at school. These results appeared to match those who believed they were doing well. Those who reported having low self-esteem in general also experienced a lack of collaborative learning. The benefits of collaborative learning are well documented (Gardner, 2002; Westwood, 1999) as are the effects of self-esteem on pupil's educational outcomes (Casserly, 2013; Casserly and Gildea, 2015). There was also a discrepancy between the reports of teachers and pupils on the question of fair treatment. In relation to inclusive policies, and in particular its

enrolment policy, the school states that it supports the principle of "inclusiveness, particularly with reference to the enrolment of children with a disability or other special educational need". To date no child has been refused admission to the school. While the school has no formal policy on inclusion, such a policy is needed so that inclusive practices, beliefs and commitments become part of the fabric of the school (Westwood, 1999). The teachers felt they were aware of the school's policies and regarded the school's actual situation as matching their expectation and standards when it came to physical accessibility and enrolment.

Inclusive Practices
The final section of the audit dealt with inclusive practices. It was in this area that staff felt they were furthest from the ideal. This manifested itself particularly in relation to whether or not pupils with additional needs had access to a broad curriculum and whether teaching methods ensured such access. While teachers appreciated the need for this to occur they reported that it was not the reality. Teachers felt that they were "so busy covering the curriculum" that it was difficult to "adapt it for a few when...there's so much to get done with the rest." "Teaching to the majority" was a failing identified as occurring in all classes. This problem could be alleviated by the increased use of in-class support, which the staff themselves identified is underutilised in the school. In fact they reported their belief that in-class support was preferable to withdrawal but was not evident in practice in the school. Interestingly teachers felt students with additional needs should have high expectations of themselves in terms of the curriculum but reported this was not the case.

Individualised planning and its importance in terms of promoting student learning was also reported as not being as it should be. In a similar vein the staff felt they needed to improve in the areas of recording and communicating at school level as well as in the manner with which they related to outside agencies. The weaknesses reported in terms of transition arrangements might also have been affected by these difficulties regarding communication.

The final area examined in terms of the audit of practices – teachers' professional development - highlights the commitment of the staff to improving practices. They acknowledged that what was happening in terms of developing teaching strategies fell short of what was required.

DISCUSSION

Identifying Barriers to Inclusion
The main barriers to inclusion highlighted by the staff reflect those found in other studies (Shevlin, Kearns, Ranaghan, Twomey, Smith and Winter, 2009; Ring and Travers, 2005; Flatman Watson, 2009; Hastings and Logan, 2013). The most prominent stumbling blocks were regarded as time, training and resources. Time, or more pertinently – the lack thereof, hinders teachers' ability to plan and liaise collaboratively with colleagues, parents and outside agencies. Restraints on time also have a knock on effect on morale. Most collaboration takes place at unsuitable times or in unsuitable places. This causes frustration which in turn becomes a negative reaction. This lack of designated time for developing inclusive practices can also have an effect at whole school level (Shevlin et al, 2009). Where structured meetings are not taking place, planning becomes isolated and unconnected (Stevens and O'Moore, 2009).

The need for continuing professional development and up-skilling expressed by teachers in this study reflects the results of other Irish research. (Ring and Travers, 2005; Shevlin et al, 2008). However, pupils with SEN do not require "radically different approaches, but more care and intensive support" (McPhillips and Shevlin, 2009, p. 71). Studies have also shown that once teachers overcome their initial fears of their abilities, they are quite capable of applying creative strategies to enable children to access the curriculum (Ring and Travers, 2005; Shevlin, Noonan Walsh, Kenny, McNeela and Molloy,2003).

Inclusion, as Flatman Watson argues, is "resource sensitive" (2009, p. 278). For inclusion to succeed the provision of adequate resources at class and whole school level is essential. Such provision is dependent upon government funding. Though the issue of government spending is outside the control of the school, the other concerns and barriers raised above can be tackled through the implementation of a variety of changes to methodologies and structures.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Teachers as Initiators of Change
The beginning point for change in the school must be the teachers. The creation of a positive attitude towards inclusion amongst the staff is an initial step in creating a truly inclusive school community (Ainscow, 2007; Rose, 2002; Westwood, 1999) and is already in place as staff are open and welcoming to all pupils and adults.

However, as highlighted in the audit teachers feel in need of training and more time to collaborate. This could be facilitated through the creation of school team meetings where a different focus is taken at each meeting. According to Ainscow "schools know more than they use" (2007, p.6). Through the pooling of ideas and strategies teachers would not only learn from each other but also recognise all they have to offer thus ensuring access to the curriculum for all children and resulting in proactive rather than reactive planning. In the long term this staff team could start creating links with other schools and ideally a special school, such that it could be a forum for sharing school expertise (Hunter and O' Connor, 2006). In developing a working relationship with a special school the staff could share resources and ideas. It also opens the possibility of teacher exchange (Stevens and O' Moore, 2009) and also that children could visit each other's school.

Current practice in this school sees the majority of support given through use of withdrawal. In contrast *Circular SP.ED 08/02* states that the child should spend most of their time with the class teacher and the resource teacher should provide additional support (DES, 2002). *Circular SP.ED 24/03* goes further by declaring that excessive use of withdrawal is contrary to the principle of inclusion and that support teaching should, wherever possible, take place within the classroom (DES, 2003). This is not to say that withdrawal is entirely without merit, it has advantages and can be effective but over reliance upon it is not beneficial (Nolan, 2005; King, 2006; Ryan, 2009). As no one solution is entirely ideal, Lerner (2000) argues that a combination of approaches should be applied (cited in Nolan, 2005). That is to say, in the school to which this study refers, and nationally there should be an increase in the role of in-class support through collaborative teaching. With this, as with other issues, it is the child's needs and learning styles that must form the basis of the decision.

Collaborative Learning and Pupils' Voices
In the audit, the level of collaborative learning amongst pupils was identified as an area for improvement by both staff and pupils. Its benefits are well known as it develops children's social and communication skills, raises their self-esteem and allows them to maximise their potential by regarding diversity as a resource rather than a hindrance (Gardner, 2002; Rose, 2002; Booth and Ainscow, 2002). One of the obstacles, according to the staff, was that children had different learning styles and so did not work well together. Thus, before we can talk about creating a forum for pupils' voices the short term aim must be the development of collaborative social skills amongst the pupils with perhaps the phased introduction of a buddy system leading to peer tutoring. The long term aim would be the creation of a student council. The right "to express...views freely in all matters affecting the

child" (United Nations, 1989) has an important role to play in developing an inclusive school. This council would represent the pupil's voice and could impart valuable insights into school policy, particularly the development of a policy on inclusion. The children could also suggest ways to make the school more physically accessible. By involving children in such a way it would increase their self-esteem, an issue that was highlighted as a concern, and help develop a more mature attitude to school (Rose, 2002). The pupil's voice also has a role to play in target setting, in particular for the older children, as it is a step towards creating independent learners capable of self-monitoring.

An Inclusive Parental Policy
The pupil's voice is not, however, the only voice that needs to be listened to. The importance of parents cannot be over-stated especially when one considers that, children spend only 15% of their time at school (DES, 2010). The central facets to an inclusive parental policy are the provision of information and regular communication between the school and parents (Winter and O' Raw, 2010). These goals could be met through the use of pre-enrolment meetings which allow for a two-way sharing of information. At such a gathering the teacher can outline and discuss ideas for the year ahead and receive feedback from the parents, with parents highlighting skills or knowledge that they would be willing to share with the class. In fostering these home-school links the class and teacher benefit by having access to certain expertise that may otherwise not have been available. These links may be developed further through initiatives such as a paired reading scheme. As with the student body the participation of parents in developing school policy should also be encouraged.

CONCLUSION
The school described is on a journey towards becoming an inclusive school. There is much that is good to be found in this institution as it works towards fulfilling its stated goal of developing each child's unique gifts but there is still much more it can do. The staff and pupils have taken the first step in the process of praxis by reflecting on their cultures, practices and policies. The next step is to combine this with transformative action. Inclusion is not a static ideal which can be obtained once and for all in a formulaic manner. Rather, inclusion is a dynamic and ever developing process with which one is never finished. Nor can an inclusive environment be created in any other way than through the collaborative actions of every individual within the organisation – we must be the change we wish to see.

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