

The Influence of Internal School Relationships on the Inclusion of Pupils with ASD

This article is based on the author's D.Ed. thesis conferred from Trinity College, Dublin, in 2013. In it she discusses how internal school relationships influence the inclusion process in relation to the inclusion of pupils with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) within mainstream primary schools. It centres on schools' interpretation of inclusion and how this impacts on staff members' engagement with the inclusion process for pupils with ASD. The aim is to provide ideas for reflection and discussion as part of the school self-evaluation process.

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THE INCLUSION/INTEGRATION DISCOURSE

Although the terms inclusion and integration are often used interchangeably, it can be argued that they have very different meanings within an educational context. Historically, the education of all pupils was brought into the public consciousness with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). For pupils with special educational needs (SEN) the *Warnock Report* (Department of Education and Science, 1978) is considered to be the catalyst for inclusion of pupils with SEN within mainstream school. This stated that “full-time education in an ordinary classroom should be the aim for many children with special educational needs” (p. 5). The Warnock Report's introduction of the term ‘special educational needs’ gave the impression that pupils with SEN are a homogeneous group and should be educated within the same classroom. However, Warnock (2005), cited in House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2005-06) stated that “one of the major disasters of the original report was that we introduced the concept of special educational needs to try and show that disabled children were not a race apart and many of these should be educated in the mainstream...but the unforeseen consequence is that SEN has come to be the name of a single category...as if it is the same problem to include a child in a wheelchair and a child with Asperger's and that is conspicuously untrue” (Volume 1, p. 16).

The Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), 1994) also influenced the move towards education for all within the mainstream system. It stated: “schools have to find ways of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities”. However, it also stated: “a child-centred pedagogy is beneficial to all students [and] can help to avoid the waste of resources and the shattering of hopes that is all too frequently a consequence of poor quality instruction and a ‘one size fits all’ mentality towards education” (pp. 6-7).

Within the Irish context, the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) was intended to standardise provision for all persons, within the state education system. The Act states that provision will be made “in the interests of the common good for the education of every person in the state including any person with a disability or who has other special educational needs...” (p. 5).

Whilst the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004) has not been fully enacted as yet, it reinforces the notion of education for all pupils within the mainstream school system when Section 2 of the Act, dealing with the inclusion of pupils with SEN, was enacted in July 2005. Section 2 of the Act states “A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs” (p. 7). However, none of these documents define inclusion or give any guidelines as to how it may be organised within schools.

The author’s D.Ed research concluded that there were a number of factors influencing inclusion of children with ASD within primary schools in Ireland. These were:

- Difficulty defining inclusion
- Interpretation of inclusion
- Collaboration within primary schools
- Collective responsibility
- Continuous professional development
- Knowledge and understanding of ASD.

Defining Inclusion

Rose (2005) comments: “Over the past decade a commitment to promote a more inclusive system can be seen to have exercised education policy makers across Europe and indeed many of the world’s countries” (p. 3). However, he goes on to say, “It would appear that all efforts made by policymakers, campaigning

organisations and teachers to provide fully inclusive schools have failed to achieve that ultimate goal” (p. 3). One can ask if the lack of success may be the result of failure to define the ‘ultimate goal’. Legislation and discussion papers promoting inclusion have failed to define inclusion or indicate how inclusion will be realised within the educational environment. There appears to be a general consensus that integration occurs when children with SEN are placed within the mainstream class with little or no adaptations to meet their needs. It is anticipated that pupils with SEN will ‘fit into’ an educational system that remains fundamentally unchanged. Inclusion, on the other hand, suggests a fundamental reorganisation of the educational system to enable all pupils, including those with SEN, to participate. However, lack of clarification is resulting in local interpretation of inclusion and thus, it can be argued, fragmented provision for pupils with SEN and in particular pupils with ASD. As Abbott (2007) suggests, “the complexity of defining inclusion is resulting in continued misunderstanding of the term and what it entails” (p. 394).

Interpreting Inclusion

In the absence of a definition of inclusion much of the debate has centred on the ‘right’ of all children to an education within the mainstream system. In order to maintain the ‘rights’ of the child schools are enrolling all pupils with their policies stating that no child will be refused admission on the basis of disability and that the needs of the child will be paramount (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013). This would suggest that schools are willing to enrol all pupils but problems arise with providing for the needs of pupils with SEN. Therefore,

It can be argued that it is not inclusion per se but the practicalities of including all children within an educational system with a history of segregation that creates the difficulty (Dunleavy, 2012, p. 19).

The author’s D.Ed. research found that school policies within sample schools state that the needs of children for supplementary teaching will be assessed using standardised and norm-referenced tests and that following assessment supplementary teaching will be provided in the areas of literacy and numeracy. However, there is no mention of ASD specific assessments in the policies and the provision of social skills development for pupils with ASD (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013). The work of Grandin and Barron (2005), Jones (2002), Jordan (1999; 2008), Jordan and Jones (1999) and others have emphasised the need for social skills development for pupils with ASD. Therefore, it can be argued that perhaps schools should take a broader definition of literacy and numeracy that includes the social and life skills necessary for the holistic development of pupils with ASD. A

collaborative approach to plan and implement a programme of supplementary teaching that will include social skills may help to meet the needs of pupils with ASD.

COLLABORATION

It is evident that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) recognises the importance of collaboration within schools. In an attempt to improve whole school development and standardise collaboration within schools the DES issued Circular 18/99 (DES, 1999) and published Learning Support Guidelines (Ireland, 2000). Within the author's research it was found that school policies have been formulated and state the importance of collaboration and indicate who will collaborate to ensure the needs of pupils with SEN are met. However, these school policies, do not always state how and when this collaboration will take place (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013). The publication of DES Circular 0008/2011 (DES, 2011) issued in response to the Croke Park Agreement now provides schools with an opportunity to specify times for collaboration. The circular directs teachers to work an additional thirty-six hours per year to include time spent on school related planning and continuous professional development. This gives school personnel an opportunity to plan discrete time for collaboration. The author's research concluded that collaboration and the sharing of expertise takes place when a difficulty arises rather than for planning pro-active strategies to prevent or minimise the possibility of difficulties arising. For this reason the author concluded that planned collaboration should form an integral part of the process for successful inclusion (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013).

Humphrey, Bartolo, Ale, Calleja, Hofsaess, Janokova, Lous, Vilkiene and Wetso (2006) suggest that school staffs "need the opportunity to converse and collaborate with colleagues" (p. 312). The need for collaboration is also recognised by Fullan (2006) who writes in relation to providing time and space to engage in "professional dialogue" (p. 11). However, it would appear that a collaborative culture may need to be established in primary schools to ensure that school personnel can engage in effective collaboration. It would appear that a "collaborative culture has not been established and whilst the reasons for this are multi-faceted they appear to be exacerbated by poorly designed school buildings and the use of pre-fabricated buildings that impede incidental collaboration between staff members (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013).

Dunleavy-Lavin (2013) found that the design and layout of school buildings are less than ideal as they do not provide what Nias, Southworth and Yeomans (1989)

described as ‘critical pathways’ where incidental interaction can take place between colleagues. “This is compounded by the use of prefabricated buildings disconnected from the main school building. The organisation of the school day and the involvement of teachers and SNAs in playground duty further diminish opportunities for informal interaction” (Dunleavy-Lavin, p. 136).

Collective Responsibility

In Irish primary schools pupils with identified SEN have the support of a resource teacher in addition to their mainstream class teacher. Children experiencing difficulty with literacy and/or numeracy may receive supplementary teaching from a learning support teacher. These support teachers are referred to as ‘special education teachers’ and may withdraw children from the classrooms or provide in-class support.

School policies analysed as part of the author’s D.Ed. research state that all staff members have a responsibility for the inclusion of pupils with ASD. However, it appears from interview data that for the most part the special education teacher takes on most of the responsibility (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013). There is collaboration between mainstream and special education teachers and this would indicate all teachers taking responsibility for the education of pupils with ASD. However, on closer analysis this collaboration appears to involve special education teachers directing the practice of mainstream teachers to assist the inclusion of pupils with ASD. This research also concluded that mainstream teachers postpone engagement in continuous professional development (CPD) until they have a pupil with ASD in their class and continue to rely on special education teachers to guide practice. The author concluded that the organisation of CPD within schools may need to be revised. One suggestion Dunleavy-Lavin (2013) put forward was to carry out an audit of training within schools. This could be followed by a proactive strategy to ensure all teachers receive training. This might demystify ASD and help all staff members to feel confident in taking responsibility for the inclusion of pupils with ASD (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013).

CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

An audit of current expertise and analysis of current and future CPD needs of the school staff might help to ensure that the needs of all pupils can be met by mainstream teachers in addition to special education teachers. Some of the needs of the school may be met by using internal expertise on a more formal basis, for example, by sharing expertise in the form of feedback from courses attended.

Powell and Jordan (2002) suggest that many of the courses provided for teachers are one-day seminars that focus on the difficulties experienced by pupils with SEN. This type of course, they suggest, leaves teachers overwhelmed and lacking in confidence including pupils with SEN in their classes. Dunleavy-Lavin (2013) suggests that teachers experience fear and anxiety that is not alleviated by attending short courses on ASD. The disadvantage of short courses on ASD has been recognised by the DES as their Inspectorate Report (Ireland, 2006) recommends a training course of not less than 450 hours for all teachers working with pupils with ASD on a full-time basis. The report also recommends training in ASD specific approaches such as *Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children* (TEACCH) and *Picture Exchange Communication System* (PECS).

For this reason providers of courses might have to re-think their training provision. One suggestion might be to organise workshops where teachers learn the skills necessary to incorporate and adapt proactive ASD strategies and approaches to meet the needs of particular children. In-school support might include demonstrating the skills of incorporating strategies and how to plan an inclusion programme that takes account of the social skills development necessary for pupils with ASD to fully partake of classroom activities (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013).

Knowledge and Understanding of ASD

Although mainstream and special education teachers have attended courses on ASD, they do not feel empowered to use their professional judgement in relation to incorporating ASD strategies into their existing pedagogical repertoire (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013). There is some knowledge and understanding of ASD within schools. However, this is mostly among special education teachers and the data further indicate that classroom teachers are relying on special education teachers to guide their practice. Mainstream teachers are putting strategies in place, such as visual schedules, without fully understanding the rationale behind this and are therefore not using it to its full effect (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013). This, as Powell and Jordan (2002) point out, is leading to teachers feeling deskilled and it is also leading to misconceptions about ASD and ASD strategies.

There appears to be a misconception among school staff that structure and routine must be adhered to rigidly. In particular, mainstream teachers do not understand that, as Powell and Jordan (2002) point out, structure should be used to scaffold learning and faded as the pupil progresses and that pupils with ASD should be taught to manage change as a life skill rather than adhering rigidly to routine (Lawson, 2011). In addition to this, Preis (2007) writes that ASD specific strategies

and approaches are not separate curricula but “a framework in which academic, social and daily living skills are taught” (p. 18). Furthermore, although interventions may assist pupils in completing tasks, teachers must be aware that some interventions, particularly those based on behavioural approaches, may help the pupil complete a task without engaging metacognitive processes. This may result in the pupil being able to complete the task in context but s/he may not be able to generalise or adapt the skill to use in different situations (Dunleavy-Lavin, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can argue that the term inclusion needs a more precise definition for pupils with ASD. Perhaps a national strategy for the inclusion of pupils with ASD is needed, possibly offering guidelines on the organisation of inclusion of pupils with ASD in the mainstream class both on a part-time and full-time basis.

In the past schools found it difficult to find time to organise the level of collaboration envisaged in their school policies. However, this has now changed with the introduction of ‘Croke Park’ hours under DES Circular 0008/2011 where discrete time can be allocated for collaboration. This means that now pro-active collaboration and the sharing of expertise can form the basis of a more effective inclusion process.

With school policies stating that all staff members are responsible for the inclusion of pupils with SEN, it can be argued that the organisation of CPD within the school should ensure that all teachers receive adequate training. The completion of an audit of present expertise within the school is a good starting point followed by a whole-school plan for CPD to meet the needs of the school and changing school population. In addition to this, organisations offering CPD in the area of ASD may need to review the type of courses being provided and in particular the short courses. It can be argued that short courses or seminars should be followed by courses/workshops where teachers could plan how to adapt/tailor strategies and approaches to meet the needs of the individual pupil. This could help teachers gain confidence in using their professional judgement in meeting the needs of individual pupils. It could also help them consolidate ASD information gained from one-day seminars.

Schools may need to review policies in order to incorporate information on ASD assessments and the provision of social skills development for pupils with ASD that can be done under the broader auspices of the Literacy and Numeracy strategy

(Department of Education and Skills, 2011). School policies should inform practice and be used as working documents that change in line with the changing needs of the school and the school population.

Long-term goals and visions are not being established within schools for a variety of reasons not least because of the lack of a collaborative ethos within schools. Long-term strategies for including all pupils and meeting their needs within the mainstream school are an essential component of an inclusive school. These can be achieved through collaboration and discussion that challenge the present perception of pupils with ASD.

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