

# Attitudes to Integration

Research indicates that a positive attitude toward handicapped children is considered the most significant teacher characteristic in the success of integration. The following article summarises the findings of an important Irish Study.

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A study of teachers' attitudes towards integrating handicapped children into the ordinary primary school system was undertaken in the Munster area among a random sample of primary school teachers in 1985/86. For the purposes of the study, the term 'handicap' was interpreted to mean, the hearing impaired, the visually impaired and the mildly mentally handicapped.

## Overview and Review

If we accept the 'common sense' hypothesis that a positive teacher attitude towards handicap will be a major plus factor in the successful integration of a handicapped child, then there are some disturbing findings in the literature. While some studies have established the existence of bias, others have shown that class-room interactions are affected by teacher expectations. The major characteristics shown to have engendered negative teacher attitudes or differential teacher interactions are physical attractiveness [Adams and Cohen, (1974)]; achievement [Cornbleth (1974)], and labelling [Dunn (1968); Blatt (1972)]. The implications of these findings would appear to be inauspicious for the successful integration of handicapped pupils into an achievement orientated educational system.

Furthermore, if integration is to be justified in educational terms the handicapped pupils must receive an education appropriate to their needs. Hegarty (1985), reporting on a major study of relevant educational practices in schools in 1982/1983, found that pupils with special needs were absorbed into schools in numerous ways. He described the diversity of organisational patterns in terms of a loose continuum.

### Degrees of Integration

1. Mainstream placement with extra educational support for individual pupils. An improved pupil/teacher ratio in the school as a whole.
2. Mainstream placement with pupil support for specific curricular areas.
3. Mainstream placement and withdrawal for specific teaching.
4. Mainstream base, attending special unit part-time for 'on site specialist' teaching.
5. Unit/special class base and mainstream classes part-time.
6. Unit/special class base throughout.
7. Mainstream school as base and special school part-time.
8. Special school as base and mainstream school part-time. (Hegarty, 1985, p.11).

The diversity of organisational aspects of integration is matched by the modifications to curriculum content and reflect a degree of ambiguity which signifies an ambivalence about the nature and purpose of integration. Nevertheless, its justification has been identified and accepted and its practical application is at an early stage yet. Connolly (1981) has stated: "The education of children with special difficulties forms part of the total educational approach in society". (Connolly, 1981, p.64).

The validity of integration is enshrined in the individual's right to equal educational opportunities. Special education, it has been argued, has been shaped as much by social, economic and political factors as has the mainstream. In the years 1870 to 1940 both systems developed along more or less the same lines. However, after 1940 a new concept materialised in England: the concept of 'equality of opportunity'. This concept was enshrined in the 1944 Education Act. However, as Ford (1982) points out it was a concept

about which there seemed to be some general concensus which in practice proved difficult to define and even more difficult to fulfil. (Ford, 1982, p.24).

In Ireland the equality of rights of the individual is enshrined in the Constitution. However, an explicit declaration of the handicapped individual's rights does not materialise until The Green Paper, 1984.

The last few years have witnessed a growing realisation of the disabled person's rights to share in and contribute to the economic, social and political and cultural activities of the society in which he/she lives. (Government Report, 1984, p.102).

However, there would appear to be some confusion as to how these rights apply in the educational field. Connolly (1981) illustrates this confusion particularly in relation to aims.

The aim of the education of the moderately handicapped differs from that of the normal population, in that there is doubt about the degree of independence they can achieve. (Connolly, 1981, p.13).

At the same time he agrees that

- (1) the moderately mentally handicapped have the same basic human needs as other children and
- (2) they go through the same stages of development in the same order but at a slower rate than normal children. (Connolly, 1981, p.15).

It would appear from a review of the literature, especially government publications, that there is a discrepancy between the enunciation of rights and the provision of a suitable educational model to fulfil those rights. This discrepancy has been addressed by two

different organisations: The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (I.N.T.O.) in a policy statement on **Integrated Education for Handicapped Children**; and The National Association for the Mentally Handicapped of Ireland (N.A.M.H.I.) in a submission to the Department of Education (1984).

In the I.N.T.O. policy statement, the individual's rights form the basis of their support for the principle of integration. Different kinds of educational provision

must be made, so that each individual child will have the opportunity to develop at his own rate and to his fullest capacity (I.N.T.O., 1983, P.1).

The individual's rights are also recognised by the N.A.M.H.I. in their submission to the Department of Education:

The principle of appropriate integration is one that our association supports - not on the grounds of economic expediency or international trends but because it is our belief that the mentally handicapped, like all other sections of the community, have a right to live as full and as meaningful a life as possible in their own local communities. (N.A.M.H.I. 1984, p.1).

The use of the word 'appropriate' signifies the association's doubts as to how the present system could facilitate effective integration. These doubts are voiced in the form of a recommendation that the Department of Education.

provide adequate finance and back-up services to the ordinary school system, to reduce the national pupil-teacher ratio and to provide some form of meaningful in-service training for all teachers. (N.A.M.H.I., 1984, p.7).

These recommendations, if implemented by the Department of Education, would form the basis of a suitable model within which integration could take place.

### **Administration of the study**

The catchment area for population selection was the counties of Munster (Cork, Kerry, Clare, Tipperary, Waterford and Limerick) in the Republic of Ireland. There are 1,036 primary schools in this area, (from the computer print-out from the Department of Education), with pupils ranging from four to twelve years of age. There are 126 hearing impaired and 28 visually impaired pupils integrated into these schools. Eighteen schools have classes for mildly mentally handicapped pupils. It proved impossible to get accurate figures on the number of mildly mentally handicapped pupils who are integrated into ordinary primary schools despite enquiries to the Department of Education and to Assessment Clinics. The schools where hearing impaired and visually impaired children are in attendance were easily identified through the Visiting Teacher Services (144 schools). One hundred teachers were chosen from those schools where a handicapped

child is in attendance, using a 'random sampling' technique. These teachers are referred to as 'experienced' teachers. Out of the remaining 882 schools, a further 100 teachers were chosen using a similar technique - these teachers are referred to as 'non-experienced' teachers.

A Likert-type questionnaire was designed to test the attitudes of teachers and differences, if any, between the attitudes of non-experienced teachers and experienced teachers towards integration.

### **Test Results**

The attitudes of non-experienced teachers called (group 1) and experienced teachers called (group 2) were tested and compared in a series of null hypotheses. The tests used assessed the teachers' attitudes in the following area:

- (1) Integration of handicapped children into the ordinary primary school system.

Significant aspects of integration were identified (using a high correlation coefficient within clusters of statements) and tested for significance. Five areas of relatedness emerged, namely:

- (a) A philosophical base for integration.
- (b) Willingness to integrate handicapped children.
- (c) Social benefits of integration for the handicapped child.
- (d) Social benefits of integration for the other children in the class.
- (e) Perceived barriers to integration.

The evidence obtained in this study shows:

- (A) A significant degree of difference between the attitudes of non-experienced teachers and experienced teachers in the following areas:
  1. Attitudes towards integration.
  2. In their level of willingness to integrate handicapped children into their classes.
- (B) No significant difference between the attitudes of non-experience teachers and experienced teachers in the following areas:
  1. A philosophical base for integration.
  2. The social benefits of integration for the handicapped child and/or the other children in the class.
  3. The perceived barriers to integration.

### **Analysis**

The results of this study are very encouraging from an integrationalist's point of view.

The teachers who responded showed a very positive attitude towards integration and towards the handicapped. However, these findings have to be understood in the light of a very inadequate level of knowledge about handicap and handicapping conditions. The comparison undertaken, while worthwhile, showed an insignificant difference in most areas studied. This level of difference is not very surprising, since most teachers had some interaction with handicapped children at some time during their teaching careers, possibly not in their own class, but within the school. This is understandable, since the development of the 'special school' system is a relatively recent development in this country. Prior to this development, handicapped children usually attended their local school on an occasional basis. The differences which emerged are more in the area of degrees of agreement rather than any ideological conflict.

The difference in attitudes between non-experienced teachers and experienced teachers towards integration is significant not only from a statistical point of view but also, when analysed, it establishes the fact that this difference in attitudes is not between agreement and disagreement but within the area of agreement. The experienced teachers indicated a very positive acceptance of the concept of integration, while the responses for non-experienced teachers, though less positive, were nevertheless very much in agreement. Slightly more than three quarters (75.93%) of all teachers surveyed were in agreement with the concept of integration, while 7.78 per cent were undecided in their responses. Those who disagreed with the concept (16.29%) were mostly drawn from the non-experienced teachers group. Graph 1 gives an example of the type of response patterns which emerged when cross tabulation analysis of data for both groups, (for statement one), was undertaken.

#### STATEMENT 1

'Handicapped children have a right to be educated with their fellow students within the ordinary primary school system'.

#### GRAPH 1

##### GROUP 1 (non-experienced teachers).

	%
disagree/disagree strongly	10.3
undecided	7.3
agree/agree strongly	82.4

##### GROUP 2 (experienced teachers).

disagree/disagree strongly	6.8
undecided	4.0
agree/agree strongly	89.2

These findings are in broad agreement with those of Hegarty, Pocklington and Lucas (1981) who concluded that:

For the vast majority (of teachers) the appropriateness of locational integration at the very least was beyond dispute. (Hegarty et al, 1981, p.546).

Furthermore, the figure of 75.93 per cent of teachers in general accepting integration corresponds very closely with the findings of the Health Education Bureau (1981) for the general population when:

Seven out of every ten married people fully accept their children being in contact with mentally handicapped children at school, while the figure increases to more than eight in ten when related to physically disabled children. (H.E.B. 1981, p.39).

There was no significant difference between non-experienced teachers and experienced teachers in their attitudes towards a philosophical base for integration. Both groups of teachers showed a very positive attitude in this area, with an average of 76.84 per cent in agreement, 8.35 per cent undecided and 14.81 per cent disagreeing.

#### STATEMENT 2

'A handicapped child could be integrated into my class'.

#### GRAPH 2

##### GROUP 1 (non-experienced teachers).

	%
disagree/disagree strongly	17.6
undecided	19.1
agree/agree strongly	63.2

##### GROUP 2 (experienced teachers).

disagree/disagree strongly	4.1
undecided	2.7
agree/agree strongly	93.2

(Scoring procedure as for graph 1).

The only explanation the writer can offer for the discrepancy in the responses is that the experienced teachers, through the situational factor of having a handicapped child in their classes, are responding to a real situation, while non-experienced teachers are

responding to a hypothetical situation. Furthermore, it would appear that the experienced teachers perceive their situation as satisfactory and secondly, it can be deduced that attitudes towards integration are amenable to change in a positive fashion through the experience of having a handicapped child in the class. This last point is in agreement with the findings of past studies, Glass and Meckler (1967), and Anderson (1973).

There was no significant difference between non-experienced teachers and experienced teachers in their attitudes towards 'the social benefits of integration for the other non-handicapped children in their classes'. The research done in this area would appear to be limited from a review of the literature [apart from Kennedy and Thurman (1982) who found that non-handicapped children were more inclined to help their handicapped classmates, though on the basis of their perception of the handicapped as incompetent]. Nevertheless, the response pattern in this area suggests a high level of agreement. The average response for the two groups of 84.5 per cent agreeing that there were social benefits for the non-handicapped children would suggest that more detailed research should be undertaken to establish what social benefits the teachers had in mind (7.5 per cent were undecided and 8.0 per cent disagreed). Comment on these findings is subjective, in that it is drawn from the writer's personal experiences. Teachers consistently remark on:

- 1 The improvement in discipline in the class
- 2 An increased level of co-operation between pupils, and
- 3 An increased consciousness of their own well-being on the part of the pupils.

The teachers always attribute these 'improvements' to the influence of the handicapped child on the rest of the class.

While there was no significant difference between non-experienced teachers and experienced teachers in what they perceived as barriers to integration, there was a high level of acceptance (seventy-nine per cent between both groups) that,

- 1 the numbers in classes,
- 2 lack of information on the education of handicapped children and
- 3 the present emphasis on academic achievement,

constituted major obstacles to effective integration.

The significance of these findings lies in the fact that, despite these grave concerns, the teachers were still very positive in their attitudes towards integrating handicapped children into the ordinary primary school system.

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