Getting Special Class Inclusion on the Agenda: Transformational Leadership and Developing a Whole School Approach to Inclusion

Whole school planning in relation to the inclusion of pupils enrolled in special classes in mainstream schools is critical in ensuring that special classes do not become a unit of segregated provision. An informed understanding of roles and responsibilities and an agreed understanding of what 'inclusion' entails and looks like in context appears to be absent in many schools. This paper is written through the lens of the human rights model of disability through which all pupils irrespective of cognitive ability or other additional needs have the right to access supportive environments where they can reach their own individual capacity for learning and enjoy social interactions with peers. Through this lens, inclusion in mainstream environments should not be hindered by subjective judgements based solely upon an impairment. This paper discusses how special classes were set up to support inclusion and the lack of direct guidance relating to the development of inclusive school policies and practice. It then focusses on the difficulties a transformational leader may encounter in establishing an inclusive culture before exploring the use of auditing frameworks to identify areas for improving policy and practice.

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INTRODUCTION

Special Classes and Inclusion

The establishment of special classes within mainstream schools is rooted in international guidelines for policy and practice with the overarching aim of

developing inclusive education systems. The Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994, p. 11) emphasised that 'inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights'. This marks the beginning of Ireland's journey towards a more inclusive education system, which began with the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998, S6) which explicitly stated that pupils with special educational needs (SEN) should have 'equality of access to and participation in education' and a 'quality education appropriate to meeting their needs and abilities'. The Act placed a statutory duty on Boards of Management 'to make reasonable provision and accommodation for students with a disability' (S15). This was complemented by The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004, S2) which states that children with SEN 'shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs'. Internationally, following on from the Salamanca statement (UNESCO, 1994), The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006, a rights based treaty, encouraged member states to enact further inclusive laws and policies and Section 24 requires that 'persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability'. This was signed by the Irish government in 2007 although not fully ratified until 2018 through the amended Education (admissions to schools) Act (Government of Ireland, 2018).

In its journey towards becoming more inclusive, Ireland offers a continuum of provision (DES, 2022). Pupils with SEN can be educated in mainstream classes, special classes within mainstream schools, special schools or home-schooled, the former can be perceived as being the most inclusive and the latter perceived as providing the least inclusive placement. There is now an increasing number of pupils with autism enrolling in autism special classes within mainstream schools. Irish special classes are defined as 'classes in mainstream schools intended to cater exclusively for students with SEN, with most special classes admitting only students from a specific category' (Ware *et al*., 2009, p.18) who have a 'professional diagnoses of disability and... an outline of complex needs' (McCoy *et al.,* 2014, p.30). At present, within our Irish system, special classes in local mainstream schools are recommended to be the 'best way forward to maximise inclusion for students' where full time mainstream settings are deemed unsuitable (NCSE, 2019, p. 12).

The guidelines for setting up and organising Irish special classes state that 'students in special classes should be included in mainstream classes to the greatest extent possible, in line with their abilities' (NCSE, 2016, p. 2). Pupils in special classes are counted twice on the school roll and this is clearly expressed to support

inclusion in mainstream classes (NCSE, 2016). The guidelines encourage schools to review and develop their whole school policies to ensure that approaches to inclusion are fully integrated into whole school planning rather than separate. Additionally, they cite that roles, responsibilities, how meaningful inclusion will occur and how peers and teachers engage with the special class, all need to be addressed (NCSE, 2016).

The guidelines, albeit minimal in length and detail, are clear in relation to the expectation that pupils enrolled in special classes should be included alongside mainstream peers, but there is no mention of their actual right to be included. Further information regarding how inclusion should be organised and what specific roles and responsibilities are, in relation to inclusion, are absent. Whilst this gives schools the autonomy to discuss and agree their own inclusive policies and practices, the absence of guidance has resulted in many schools not actively developing inclusive policies and practices, most likely due to an uncertainty of what being inclusive entails.

When schools establish a new special class, they are invited to access a four-day training course primarily aimed at supporting the newly appointed special class teacher, a full day of training for the whole school staff and the principal is encouraged to attend a half day seminar. The content of these courses certainly encourage inclusive practices but predominantly relate to understanding an autism diagnosis, individual planning and assessment, teaching and learning methodologies and managing regulation. All of which is relevant, appropriate and very much needed in relation to developing teacher capacity but does not address staff roles and responsibilities relating to how to develop an inclusive school and how to ensure mainstream inclusion has a purpose and is meaningful. Training has undoubtedly moved away from the medical model of disability to a more biopsychosocial model, but an understanding of the human right to be included has not been fully realised as existing training does not explicitly communicate to schools an autistic pupil's right to access mainstream environments. Furthermore, advising schools in relation to writing inclusive policies falls outside the remit of NCSE advisors and Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO), both of whom have a primary role to directly support schools.

It is no surprise then, that research has shown that inclusion into mainstream classes can be minimal (McCoy *et al.*, 2016) and that movement between the two settings is not facilitating increased inclusion. In relation to inclusion, the DES found that the 'current system of special classes appears to be having limited success for many learners who enrol in a special class' and that there is a real danger that 'segregated

provision could expand unintentionally' (DES, 2019, p. 7). The NCSE also reports that pupils enrolled in primary special classes 'generally remain together across school years and spend most, if not all, of their week together' (NCSE, 2019, p. 13). A whole school (WS) approach to inclusion however has the potential to develop a school's capacity to meaningfully include pupils from special classes.

DISCUSSION

Developing a Whole School Inclusive Culture

Setting time aside to create a mutual understanding about what inclusion is, what it looks like and what it entails is the first step towards developing an inclusive vision. When schools have an agreed understanding of inclusion they can then begin the process of reviewing and developing their policies and practices to ensure that each pupil's right to be included is actualised.

Staff who support an inclusive vision that all pupils belong there, as a right, and can learn successfully within the school is paramount in establishing an inclusive culture. Actively involving staff and sharing responsibility for planning is necessary in order to for schools to build and maintain consensus for an inclusive vision (Villa and Thousand, 2012). Culture has an intangible quality (O' Riordan, 2017) which underlies everything that occurs in schools including how staff behave in relation to how changes are brought into a school (Mitchell, 2014) and although school leaders play a critical role in initiating the development of inclusive culture by setting a clear inclusive vision, the journey of developing a culture of inclusion is one which must be shared with all staff (O' Riordan, 2017). Culture and vision setting should be addressed very shortly after a special class is established so that a positive whole school approach to inclusion can be agreed, developed and importantly, owned by staff. Building a strong inclusive culture ensures that it endures regardless of changes that may occur within the school context such as staffing, pupil presentation and internal organisation. Left unaddressed, embedded cultures and attitudes that have developed over time, that are not aligned with a positive inclusive vision, may be very difficult to change for leaders of a school with a special class.

Transformational Leadership

Within this paper, the term transformational leader is used to describe a leader who is able to promote staff commitment to developing the inclusion of pupils enrolled in special classes through the implementation of agreed inclusive policies and practice. A transformational leader, has the ability to lead staff beyond their

immediate self-interests to identify where change is required, and can create a vision to guide changes in policy and practice in order to execute changes. A transformational leader has a focus on the commitments and capacities of staff (Bush and Glover, 2014), can motivate staff by raising consciousness about the importance of organisational goals (Gumus *et al*., 2003, p. 375) and can create a climate where teachers engage and share their professional learning (Hallinger, 2003). As such, a transformational leadership has the most potential for leading significant developments in establishing inclusive environments (Rose and Shevlin, 2021; Mitchell, 2014). For the transformational leader who is able to prioritise the development of a whole school approach to inclusion, in tandem with other demands that the diverse role of leadership entails, the use of auditing tools may be useful in stimulating whole school discussions with the aim of identifying areas for development.

Auditing Tools and Frameworks for Developing Inclusion
Villa and Thousand (2012, p. 203) highlight that developing an inclusive school needs to be set 'in wider issues of overall school effectiveness and school improvement'. Proactive WS planning can help schools manage change and plan a course of action to facilitate inclusion that is pupil based and context specific. For this to occur, it is necessary to allocate time on a regular basis for systematic reflection by all staff in order to execute and evaluate changes that have been put in place so that further appropriate actions can be planned and effected if required (Donnellan *et al*., 2021). However, there are many factors that will influence the success of WS planning for inclusion including the selection of a tool that can be used and setting the audit tool within a more formal evaluation framework. Further challenges upon adopting an audit model include ensuring the validity and reliability of staff responses regarding areas for improvement and the collective ability of staff to meaningfully address areas for development.

The NCSE recommend the use of the 'Inclusive Education Framework' (IEF) (NCSE, 2011) to schools who wish to reflect upon their inclusivity with an intention to making targeted plans to develop inclusive policy and practice. The framework encourages schools to 'show what they are doing well; identify areas they need to improve; and put plans in place to address areas for improvement' (NCSE, 2011, p. 5). To use the IEF as an audit, staff collectively use the framework as a planning tool. Information is gathered under ten themes and a plan is formulated that will enable them to progress further towards implementing the principles of inclusion. However, published in 2011, it is over eleven years old and the implementation guidance and certification that originally accompanied the framework is no longer available.

Newly published and recommended on all NCSE autism specific based seminars are the Autism Good Practice Indicators (AGPI) (DES, 2022) which highlights eight key principles related to WS inclusive practice, in relation to pupils with autism. This publication encourages schools to identify what inclusive practices are developed and developing so that areas can be identified as priorities for further development. This audit is more specific to autism special classes than the IEF and within the first principle, 'positive inclusive ethos', the AGPI directly references roles and responsibilities within the school community, the adjustment of existing structures and systems and promotes individual pupil centred planning for inclusion (DES, 2022).

However, the usefulness of these frameworks is of course, dependent on the level of school engagement with the content as it is not mandatory for schools with special classes to engage with informal audits. A transformational leader may bring tools to audit inclusivity to staff but the overall school community will influence the extent of real engagement in self-reflection in relation to inclusivity, bearing in mind there is no specific guidance for staff in relation to auditing whole school inclusive practice through SSE.

A more formalised and mandatory framework to use could be the Looking at our Schools (LAOS) publication (Department of Education and Skills, 2022) as this was designed to underpin both school self-evaluation and school inspections. LAOS promotes a commitment to inclusion and clearly emphasises 'the need for all pupils to be meaningfully included in their school community…in accordance with their abilities, strengths, stages of development and identified learning needs' (DES, 2022, p. 8). Significantly, LAOS states that 'specific school contexts will determine which statements of practice can be used meaningfully' and that the 'emphasis should be on the relevance of the statement to the school and its usefulness in bringing about school improvement' (DES, 2022, p. 17). If a school has a special class and thus has a responsibility to include pupils in the mainstream class, then this specific context clearly should warrant inclusive practice standards to be identified as particularly relevant. Also significant is that LAOS (2022) emphasises the principles of distributed leadership. Under LAOS, distributed leaders, have a responsibility to 'foster a commitment to inclusion' (2022, p. 15) which entails ensuring policies are 'inclusive and implemented accordingly' (2022, p. 34). For the transformational leader, a supportive, knowledgeable distributed leadership team who share and promote an inclusive vision may be key to successfully developing an inclusive culture by determining it as priority.

The LAOS framework could be used as an audit framework by itself, but is recommended to be used to guide school self-evaluation (SSE), formally introduced

in 2012. SSE is mandatory and using SSE to document areas for development can formalise WS approaches to inclusion. Schools have autonomy to identify the areas of practice where they feel improvement is needed. Where a transformational leader and the distributed leadership team share and promote an inclusive vision, the development of inclusive policy and practice for pupils enrolled in special classes has the potential to become an official formalised priority. Using the AGPI of WS inclusive policy and practices and placing these indicators within a more formal school evaluation framework leading to a mandatory three-year improvement plan may be the best way to ensure that WS inclusion for pupils in a special class is developed in schools.

Ensuring Reliability and Validity of Responses

Following the identification of an auditing tool and a framework to situate the development of inclusive practices, school leaders need to consider how to ensure the validity and reliability of their audit. Obtaining the viewpoints from different people within the school community is important in evaluating the school in context as 'various stakeholder perspectives provide a more comprehensive picture of issues being investigated' (O'Brien*, et al.,* 2019, p. 11). However, the extent to which stakeholders cognitively process, understand and agree upon the terms and language used in the tool 'determines the cognitive validity of SSE' (Faddar *et al.,* 2016, p. 397). With regard to the elusive term 'inclusive education', the viewpoint of what this means may differ between a parent, student, mainstream classroom teacher, a special class teacher and the chairperson of the board of management. Individual responses to the auditing process may be affected by each person's underlying assumptions and knowledge. A mainstream teacher may consider themselves an inclusive teacher if there are diverse needs within the class, whereas a special class teacher may relate inclusion to the extent that the pupils enrolled in the special class access a mainstream class or to the extent to which specific planning and adaptations are made for individual pupils. Further, the chairperson of the board of management may feel a school is inclusive purely because there is class-based provision for autistic pupils on site. Staff with various positions and roles in schools will have different perspectives based on their background and expertise that influence their point of reference (Fadder *et al.,* 2017, p. 400). The audit may be distorted by a tendency to give 'socially desirable responses, a phenomenon where individuals give over favourably self-descriptions' to the extent they are 'faking good' (Fadder *et al.,* 2018, p. 660) rather than basing their reflections on inclusivity on real facts and experiences. This reinforces the importance of an agreed consensus amongst staff about what inclusion entails in addition to evidential examples of developed inclusive practices to be documented as part of the auditing process.

Collaboration

After a school has navigated itself through the auditing process and identified what areas require development in policy and practice in order to include all pupils enrolled in special classes, collaboration must be prioritised. Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018, p. 3) highlight the benefits of collaborative professionalism are 'irrefutable' in enhancing 'the implementation of innovation and change'. Collaboration can take different forms. It may entail teacher-to-teacher joint planning meetings, individual educational planning meetings, school team meetings, links with a nearby special school where expertise can be sought or networking with other local schools where practices can be shared. Ainscow and Sandhill (2010, p. 402) discuss that instrumental to developing inclusive practice is the 'processes of social learning within organisational contexts'. This entails increasing capacity and accountability by seeking ways to overcome barriers to inclusion by challenging existing ways of working. Opportunities for consistent self-reflection, team-reflection and evaluation in relation to provision for individual pupils will enhance inclusion (Donnellan *et al.,* 2021). Finding time to collaborate during the school day has been frequently cited one of the main barriers to inclusion. (O' Riordan, 2017) and so to ensure that planning for inclusion occurs, time and dedicated spaces must be timetabled in for staff to collaborate across the different settings.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the importance of a transformational leader in addressing school culture and setting an inclusive vision. It has explored the collaborative use of an autism specific audit tool, used within an evaluation framework, to identify areas for development. It has also highlighted the complexities involved for leaders navigating through the process of developing whole school approaches to inclusion. Ultimately, understanding the intentions of special class establishment and the right of an autistic pupil to be included is crucial and this needs to be communicated more explicitly by relevant supporting bodies in their publications and training. The lack of policy guidance to direct schools in relation to inclusion, in addition to the absence of a mandatory requirement for schools to consciously develop WS approaches to inclusion may well be the main barriers to developing WS approaches. The result of which being that many pupils enrolled in special classes are spending their time in school segregated from the rest of the school community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of what has been explored throughout this paper, the following recommendations may be useful starting points for future discussions relating to autistic pupils enrolled in special classes and enacting their right to be included in mainstream environments.

Firstly, a consideration as to whether mandatory guidelines should be published that require schools with special classes to reflect upon inclusive policy and practice during the SSE process. A mandatory requirement would ensure that standards of inclusive practice are consciously developed within set time frames. Supporting guidelines in relation to developing inclusive policies, in addition to the use of a trained facilitator to assist schools in objectively auditing their policies and practice would be hugely beneficial to schools.

Secondly, prior to establishing a special class in a school, additional preparatory seminars for leadership teams in relation to their roles and responsibilities relating to inclusion would support the development of WS policy and practice. Whole school training in relation to inclusion would further reinforce an agreed understanding of inclusion. This would result in an increased ability to put into place a three-year inclusion development plan with manageable targets to be set, implemented and accomplished. This, in addition to regular allocated time for collaboration would get inclusion firmly on the agenda in schools and ensure all pupils, irrespective of cognitive ability and difference, have their right to be included alongside their peers realised.

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