

Establishing Pathways to Inclusion: Investigating the Experiences and Outcomes for Students with Special Educational Needs

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At a moment when the implementation of a, by now, widely accepted global education policy of inclusion, and underpinned by a ‘common quest to establish more inclusive environments’, this book presents an important insight into the delivery of inclusive education in the context of the Irish education system.

The catalyst for this publication is Project IRIS (Inclusive Research in Irish Schools, 2015) commissioned by the National Council for Special Education. Unique in Europe as the largest longitudinal study of provision for students with special educational needs, these findings allied with findings from international literature on the subject, enabled the authors to consider the reality of inclusive education in Ireland from a wide range of perspectives at both primary and post-primary levels.

The book is clearly laid out in three sections, focussing first on establishing the context for inclusive education, followed by presenting stakeholders’ viewpoints, and concluding with important learnings in relation to effective inclusive practice. As such, the authors indicate that their intention is to consider ‘policy, practice, experiences and outcomes’.

Despite the relative paucity of recent references, many of the well-rehearsed, thorny issues affecting successful implementation of inclusive policy highlighted in this book, continue to persist. These are, for example, resourcing issues which inevitably leave a gap between policy and practice and influence the fact that many of the recommendations of the EPSEN Act remain to be implemented; parent frustration with continuing issues around access to assessment; teacher efficacy in terms of knowledge, confidence, and use of effective pedagogical strategies;

student issues in terms of isolation and dependence; and the stubborn resistance to change of the undercurrent of a deficit perspective.

Throughout the book we hear the authentic voice of stakeholders – students, parents, and professionals, heralding the importance of collaboration in the delivery of an effective inclusive education system. The wide base of evidence from which the book draws, uncovers and forefronts the key elements of *collaboration* and the development of *positive relationships* as cornerstones in the successful implementation of effective inclusion. The need to establish positive and reciprocal relationships is highlighted and reinforced repeatedly throughout this book. These relationships include, for example, *internal relationships* such as respectful classroom relationships, both among the students in the classroom and between the teacher and the students; school relationships among the professionals and paraprofessionals in the school and between school leadership and school personnel, represented as ‘transformative’ when quality relationships with school personnel are fostered. Crucially, the significant importance of positive *external relationships* between the teachers and other professionals, and between school personnel and parents are also highlighted. Relationships of a more abstract nature such as the important relationship between happiness and successful learning outcomes for students, and the ‘bi-directional’ relationship between academic and social outcomes for students gain particular traction in this book.

Ongoing tensions in effective implementation of inclusive education such as inadequate levels of connectedness between professionals from the Health sector and the Education sector, and the broadly positive views expressed by parents and students contrasted with the often expressed sense of inadequacy voiced by teachers are clearly articulated. Drawing attention to challenges surrounding the effective use of differentiation as a pedagogical strategy spotlights the recognition that the academic development of students may at times be relegated due to an over-emphasis on their social development.

This book is at once academic and yet easily accessible to a wide audience, derives from a broad base of evidence, and has a clear and compelling writing style. It will serve as a solid baseline introduction for those interested in pursuing research in the field of implementing effective inclusive education, along with those tasked with its delivery and those centrally involved as users in the system.

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