A Whole School Approach to Supporting Students with Autistic Spectrum Disorders Presenting with Challenging Behaviour in the Post-Primary School

The findings presented here reflect a small element of a broader study on the perspectives of teachers working with students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) who present with challenging behaviour (CB). The focus of this paper is on the strategies and supports that can be applied at whole school level to support the post-primary student with ASD.

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INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools is a core philosophy of the education system in the Republic of Ireland (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2007). This has been underpinned by a number of key Government Acts, most notably the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) albeit partially implemented. The initial research, from which this paper has emanated, explored the perspectives of post-primary school teachers supporting students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) who may also present with challenging behaviour.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is a term that is used to describe a neurological difference in brain development that affects how a person thinks, learns and interacts with others. Jones, Baker, English and Lyn-Cook (2012) identify ways that ASD affects individuals. They experience difficulties understanding the social interactive style and emotional expression of others. Students with ASD are challenged both verbally and non-verbally in their understanding and use of communication and language. They experience differences in how information, particularly sensory, is processed and may demonstrate rigidity in their thinking.

Challenging behaviour, such as stereotypical behaviour, aggression, property destruction, and self-injury are often exhibited by individuals with intellectual

disabilities (Symons, Sperry, Dropik and Bodfish, 2005). This is not entirely surprising given that risk factors for the development of such behaviours include impairments in intellectual functioning, deficits in communication/language skills, and impairments in social skills. These deficits together with the impairment in flexible thinking and sensory sensitivities are core aspects of ASD (Jones et al., 2012). Therefore, such challenging behaviours are also commonly observed in persons with ASD (Rojahn, Wilkins, Matson and Boisjoli, 2009). Further, it has been found that individuals with both a learning disability and ASD are at greater risk for developing challenging behaviours and that these behaviours tend to be of greater severity than those with a learning disability alone (Rojahn et al., 2009). Morewood, Humphrey and Symes, 2011) cites evidence from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) and from the Department for Education (2010) demonstrating that students with ASD are at an increased risk of experiencing negative outcomes in comparison to other learners as a result of CB. Students with ASD are around eight times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than students without SEN (Morewood et al., 2011). Therefore, addressing whole school inclusive practice is particularly pertinent.

INCLUSION AND ASD
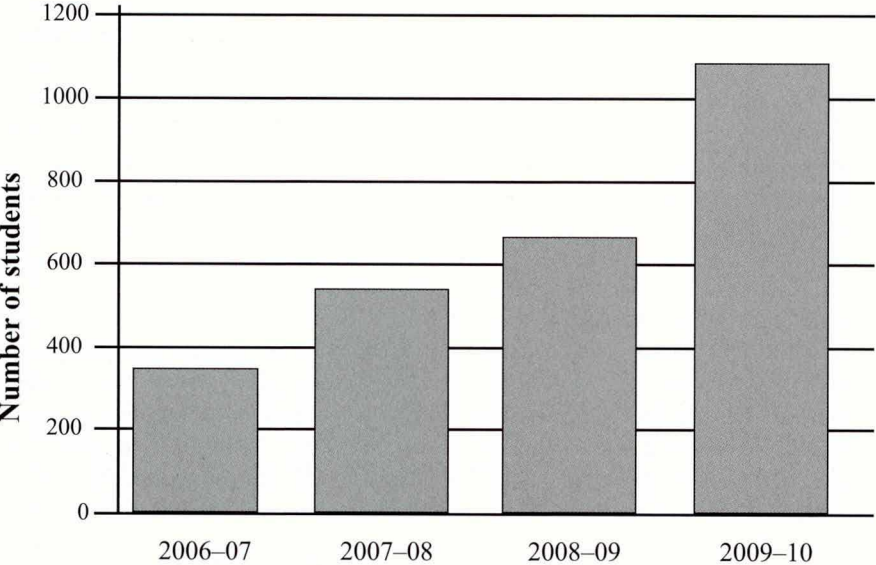
Figure 1: Number of Students with ASD in Post-primary Schools Being Supported by a Resource Teacher (NCSE, 2010)

National Context

Figures published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2013) show an increase in the number of students with ASD attending mainstream post-primary schools in recent years. Some students with ASD are included in mainstream schools with the support of a resource teacher. Previous figures indicate a significant increase in these numbers from 348 in the academic year 2006-2007 to 1090 by 2009-2010 (NCSE, 2010).

Another development in the education system has been the establishment of units for students with ASD attached to mainstream schools. The units are often used by students in a flexible manner, for example, learning can occur both in the unit and in mainstream classes as appropriate. In 2003 no such units existed in the post primary sector. By 2013 there were ninety-six units throughout the country (NCSE, 2013).
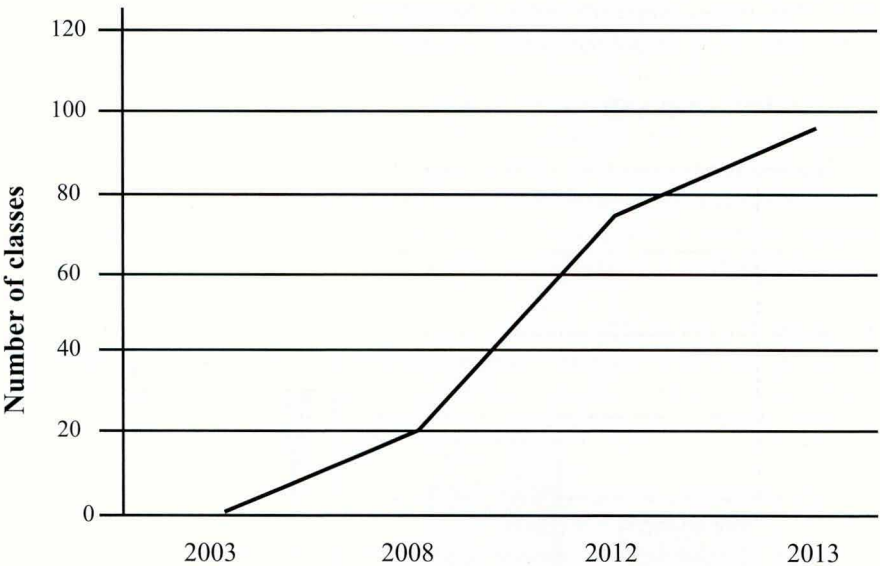
Figure 2: Number of Classes for Students with ASD Attached to Mainstream Post-primary Schools (NCSE, 2013)

The Challenge of Inclusion in Mainstream Post-Primary Schools

Despite the increase in students accessing mainstream post-primary education, the inclusion of students with autism is still a complex and inadequately understood

area of education (Morewood et al., 2011) that is only beginning to be explored by researchers.

Research suggests that one of the most significant barriers to the inclusion of students with SEN in the post-primary is the rigidity of the curriculum and the exam system (Shevlin, Kearns, Ranaghan, Twomey, Smith and Winter, 2009). Despite promotion of inclusion by the DES, many teachers report being pressurised to complete curricula while differentiating for students with SEN (Shevlin et al.).

According to Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley (2008) training of the whole staff is a key feature of the inclusive school and as a result of training, staff are better qualified to deal with an increasingly diverse school population. Teacher attitude to inclusion and awareness of the value of continuous professional development are highlighted as key factors to the success of inclusion (Parsons, Guldberg, MacLeod, Jones, Prunty and Balfe, 2011; Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley).

The present economic climate has put constraints on the provision of support services for schools from Government agencies. This has been evident, for example in a reduction in resource teaching hours and a tightening in the provision of special needs assistant (SNA) support. The transition to the complex environment of the post-primary school coinciding with adolescence can, 'without support' be a considerable challenge for the individual with ASD (Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr and Smith, 2006).

Rationale for the Study
It is in the context of this acknowledged link between ASD and CB (Rojahn et al., 2009) together with a concern about the risk of negative outcomes for these students, that the researchers wished to identify:

- The levels of challenging behaviour within the post-primary schools among students with ASD
- How schools were responding to the challenging behaviours
- What methodologies and strategies were most successful in reducing challenging behaviour in students with ASD in the post-primary school.

The findings presented in this paper reflect a small element of the broader study, focusing on three major factors identified that can be applied to whole school inclusion of students with ASD presenting with CB.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sample group were recent graduates of the St. Angela's Certificate/Diploma in Special Educational Needs (Autistic Spectrum Disorder) programme. This purposeful sample of participants was identified as having experience and qualifications in the field. A questionnaire was utilised in order to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. Nine schools from a wide geographical spread were involved in the study, having a total of seventy-six students with ASD. Each teacher held multiple roles within their school including mainstream class teaching with and without students with ASD in their classes, resource teaching and teaching in unit(s) for students with ASD. The teachers identified that their students represented a cross section of abilities with fifty-four percent ($n=41$) having a learning difficulty, twenty-one percent ($n=16$) having a specific learning difficulty and twenty-five percent ($n=19$) having no additional learning difficulties. Just over one in three demonstrated challenging behaviours. The participants identified that CB affected the learning and participation of the student with ASD and their peers, and that it impacted on teaching and caused harm to others.

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted. Key themes were identified on the basis of a repeated pattern across the data and relevance to the study. The themes were reviewed to ensure consistency and reliability (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In order to circumvent repetition all themes were analysed for external heterogeneity (Braun and Clarke).

FINDINGS

The three main themes identifying key elements to successful inclusion for students with ASD and CB were:

- A Whole School Understanding of the Individual with ASD
- Building Relationships
- Understanding the Individual.

Theme One: A Whole School Understanding of the Individual with ASD
A whole school understanding of the impact of ASD was identified as fundamental to successful inclusion. The specialist teachers reported a high level of knowledge of ASD and of the individual with whom they worked. According to the participants, contributing factors to CB included having difficulties in communicating wants, needs and thoughts clearly. Social skills deficits led to challenges in interacting with peers and behaving appropriately in social

situations. Students with ASD often showed a lack of understanding of their environment and a lack of self awareness relating to adolescence and gender specific biological changes. They were often challenged by tasks, such as class work and social situations. A significant proportion of the participants indicated that their students with ASD used CB as a means of avoidance.

The teachers' current practice of sharing information about the teaching and learning of individual students with ASD with the whole school community was identified. In-school support and collaboration were mentioned. The specialist team, consisting of the SEN teacher, ASD class teacher and the SNA, provided support for each other and support for the staff. Respondents felt that the sharing of experiences helped the whole staff to include the student with ASD in an individualistic manner. The support provided was unidirectional; the specialist team were providing support for each other and for the mainstream staff through advice and discussion. However, thirty-three percent (n=3) of respondents felt that they could be supported by their mainstream colleagues which would lead to a more cohesive whole school approach.

Theme Two: Building Relationships
Teachers identified the importance of building relationships with the student. They recognised that it takes time to build trust and for the student to feel confident in the relationship; to feel valued and that their opinions are respected. The respondents identified that they placed emphasis on discussion of behaviours and that over time students understood that discipline is not punishment but a process that is important for democracy in the school environment.

The specialist teachers reported that they became advocates for the student with ASD, firstly because of their relationship, secondly as a result of a greater understanding of the student, and thirdly due to their specialist knowledge. Teachers noted that they developed a more holistic understanding of the student as a result of this approach. They became aware of their own skills as a negotiator and the importance of being calm and reassuring.

All respondents acknowledged that the training they received through the Post-graduate Diploma in SEN (ASD) had a positive impact on them, their students and their schools. They felt that they had developed a greater understanding of ASD, gained specific strategies/methodologies and began to manage situations in a more effective manner. Within the school they were seen as the 'specialist'. Where an ASD unit existed the mainstream staff used the unit as a place of referral for CB, as a place to send students to 'cool off', appropriate to the discipline structures of

the school. However, the 'problem' was sometimes passed on for the teacher in the specialist unit to deal with.

Theme Three: Understanding the Individual

The role of the specialist teacher was directly linked to the individualised approach for the student. Respondents referred to the unique needs of each student, '...these strategies are useful because they are individually tailored to each child's needs. Each ASD student has unique needs' (Respondent 4). The understanding of the development and the management of the individual social and communication skills of the student with ASD and CB were identified as one of the most important aspects of the role of the specialist teacher in reducing and preventing CB.

The respondents mentioned the use of a range of strategies such as: visual supports, teacher minimising language/communication used during CB incident, calming strategies, post CB discussion, developing the student's communication skills so they can negotiate their school environment more effectively, and teaching voice modulation to the student. Specific methodologies such as Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) were also referred to. TEACCH was seen to be successful by the respondents because of the emphasis on structuring the environment, routine, planning, in particular planning for transition/s and the use of visual supports. The respondents found ABA a useful methodology for CB because it helped them to identify the behaviour and to understand its trigger(s). The students could recognise consequences of their CB (rewards as reinforcer) and the teacher could learn how to prevent incidents of CB re-occurring. The system of recoding helped the support teacher in meeting the individual needs of the student. Teachers identified the need for a range of methodologies to meet the changing needs of students:

> They worked at the time. When you find something that works for a student it is good to tap into it and use it to full effect. But remember, it may not always work with that student! (Respondent 5).

The respondents highlighted the importance of collaborating with colleagues, supporting each other, and the individual with ASD, while having a broad knowledge of strategies and methodologies in order to create an inclusive environment.

DISCUSSION

As a result of the analysis of the data, a model to support schools in reflecting on their inclusive practices in relation to students with ASD was devised (Figure 3). A whole school approach to ASD, together with an understanding of the strengths and needs of each individual appears to form the foundation for teaching and learning. All aspects of the model can be addressed concurrently. As schools reflect on their practice they may consider the extent to which each layer of inclusive practice has become embedded for students with ASD.
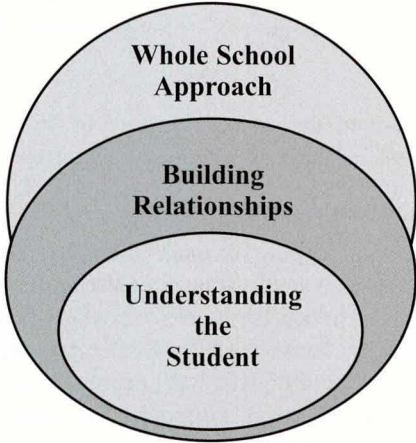
Figure 3: Model for Inclusion of Students with ASD

Layer One: Whole School Approach
The acquired knowledge of the specialist teacher led to the development of relationships and the application of appropriate teaching methodologies for the student with ASD. It is important that all members of staff understand how individuals with ASD think and learn (Parsons et al., 2011). Lack of understanding by the student of their environment together with access to a 'chill out' space were identified as factors that may contribute to CB. This is supported by Morewood et al., 2011 who suggests that the environment is examined so that students can be independent within the school. Participants identified the need for a shared responsibility within whole school community working towards the goal of inclusion where individual roles and responsibilities are clearly defined as recommended by DES (2007).

Layer Two: Building Relationships

The importance of developing positive relationships between all staff working with the student with ASD is emphasised in research (Charman, Pellicano, Peacey, Peacey, Forward and Dockrell, 2011). Accordingly, limiting the number of appropriately trained specialist teachers working as advocates on behalf of the students with ASD enhances the opportunities of developing relationships with the whole staff. Training opportunities matched to the varying needs of staff as identified in this research will augment the formation of the relationships through increased knowledge (Parsons et al., 2011; McGillicuddy and O'Donnell, 2013). According to participants, the flexibility of the specialist teacher contributes significantly to meeting the differing needs of students reflecting the research of Morewood et al., 2011.

Layer Three: Understanding the Student

Understanding the individual with ASD is crucial. The results of this study echo government policy which emphasises individualised assessment leading to the identification of strengths and needs, and subsequently the selection of appropriate methodologies and a plan for inclusion (DES, 2007; NEPS, 2010). A broad range of methodologies and strategies were identified in this study reflecting research which advocates that a mixture of ASD specific and general teaching methodologies be utilised (Parsons, Guldberg, MacLeod, Jones, Prunty and Balfe, 2009). Results of this study prioritise the development of life, communication and social skills as identified in other research (Parsons, Guldberg, MacLeod, Jones, Prunty and Balfe).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to share current practice from specialist professionals working with students with ASD. A model for a whole school approach to supporting students with ASD in the post-primary school was developed. Emphasis was placed on the importance of the whole school understanding of ASD and the individual with ASD, the significance of building relationships with the student and collaborating with and supporting colleagues working with the student. The individual is at the core of this model of inclusion. All staff should be aware of individualised practice in relation to assessment, and participate in differentiated approaches for teaching and learning cognisant of how ASD impacts on the learning of the individual.

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