

An Investigation into the Attitudes of Teachers towards Inclusion in a Post-Primary School in Ireland

This article reports findings from a small-scale study of the attitudes of teachers in a large community school to the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN). International research has considered the impact of a wide range of student-, teacher- and school-related factors on teacher attitude to inclusion and this study explored the extent to which such factors might influence teacher attitude in an Irish mainstream post primary school. The overall findings in relation to teacher attitude to inclusion and the evidence regarding the influence of teacher and child-related variables are presented and discussed in brief. However, the main focus is on the impact of environment-related variables i.e. those aspects of the school environment which the teachers felt support and challenge them regarding inclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, educational policy and practice in Ireland has undergone considerable change as schools strive to adapt to a policy of inclusion. Legislation has been enacted (Ireland, 2004), support structures established (National Council for Special Education (NCSE)) a raft of policy documentation promoting inclusion has been published (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2007; DES and National Educational Psychological Service, 2010; NCSE, 2011a), and there has been significant investment in resources to support children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Ireland), indicates the State's clear favouring of inclusive education asserting that "A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs". However, the Act places two important caveats on this policy namely where the nature or extent of the child's needs are inconsistent with "the

best interests of the child...or the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated” (p. xx).

Purpose, Rationale and Context

It has been argued by many commentators that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes are key components of the successful implementation of any inclusive policy (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Shevlin, Kearns, Ranaghan, Twomey, Smith and Winter, 2009; Florian and Rouse, 2010). In a systematic review of twenty-eight US studies published between 1958 and 1995, in which surveys were used to elicit the views of mainstream teachers regarding inclusion, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) conclude that the majority of teachers were positive about the concept of inclusion. Likewise, reviewing international research published between 1984 and 2000, Avramidis and Norwich found teacher attitudes to be positive overall. Analysis of the profile of respondents in the US studies reviewed by Scruggs and Mastropieri indicates that the vast majority were elementary school teachers, a finding supported by de Simone and Parmar (2006) who assert that the majority of the research studies have focused on teachers at primary level. In Ireland, a systematic analysis of studies of attitudes to SEN listed in the *NCSE Database of SEN Research and Policy* reveals that only fifteen of forty-six studies addressed teacher attitude and of these only three focused on the attitudes of post-primary teachers (NCSE, 2011b). This study sought to address this apparent gap in current research on teacher attitude to inclusion at post-primary level in Ireland by investigating the attitudes of teachers in a Vocational Education Committee (VEC) community college.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Adopting a typology of child-, teacher- and environment-related factors originally developed by Salvia and Munson (1986), Avramidis and Norwich (2002) critically review the research literature and draw some conclusions regarding the relative contribution of each set of factors to teacher attitude. While the authors contend that much of the research evidence is inconsistent and inconclusive and acknowledge that many of the factors are interrelated, this tripartite framework is used here to identify and discuss key variables which appear to influence teacher attitude and therefore frame the current study.

Child-Related Factors

Across the research literature, although there is considerable evidence of positive teacher attitude overall to inclusion, there is little evidence that teachers favour inclusion for all students, with attitude strongly influenced by the type and extent

of pupil need (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). The influence of the nature and severity of disability on teacher attitude has been extensively studied (Avramidis and Norwich) while a much smaller number of studies have investigated the impact of pupil age or grade level (Leyser, Kapperman and Keller, 1994; Mega, Castellini and Vianello, 1998). Overall, teachers are more positively disposed to the inclusion of pupils who have physical or sensory impairments or mild learning disabilities than pupils with more severe or complex SEN (Scruggs and Mastropieri, 1996; Avramidis and Norwich). Students with medical or physical disability were considered easiest to manage in the classroom whereas including students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) was less positively received (Bowman, 1986; Chazan, 1994; Evans and Lunt, 2002). In the Irish context, Meegan and MacPhail (2006) in their survey of teachers of physical education (PE) in 745 secondary schools concluded that teachers were 'undecided' rather than in favour of or opposed to the inclusion of pupils with specific learning disabilities (SLD), emotional/behavioural disorder (EBD) or mild/moderate general learning disabilities (GLD). In contrast, teachers were less positively disposed towards the inclusion of pupils with moderate/severe GLD.

As regards pupil age or grade level the research evidence remains limited and the findings inconclusive. An early review by Salvia and Munson (1986) concluded that the older the child, the less positive teachers' attitudes became with an increasing emphasis on subject-matter rather than on the needs of individual children. Similarly, Clough and Lindsay (1991) found that for teachers whose prime focus was on course work, children with SEN were viewed as being problematic in terms of classroom management. In contrast, in an international study, Leyser et al. (1994) found the views of senior high school teachers to be more positive than those teaching at the junior high school and elementary level. Some commentators have suggested that organisational differences between primary and secondary level school systems may have an impact on teacher attitude. For example, time for differentiation of teaching and learning may be more limited at second level because teachers work with several groups of pupils in any given day (Ernst and Rogers, 2009), while the subject-specialist model typical of second-level school may be less conducive to inclusion than the primary school model of class teaching with a somewhat wider focus on pupil development more generally (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). Reflecting these analyses in an Irish context Shevlin et al. (2009) assert that:

the challenges of inclusion could be more complex at post-primary level in view of curricular complexity, timetabling, examination demands and possible adolescent resistance to support at this level (p. 5).

Teacher-Related Factors

The influence of a range of demographic factors including gender, age, teaching experience and training on teacher attitude has also been investigated. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) assert that overall the findings are inconsistent and inconclusive, and that teacher-related variables are much less influential than child- (or indeed environment-related) factors. For example, in relation to gender, they cite some early studies reporting a tendency for female teachers to display more positive attitudes, while other studies have found male teachers to have more positive attitudes (Ernst and Rogers, 2009). Research findings in relation to teacher age or years of experience are also inconclusive. Some studies report that those teaching longer are generally less well disposed to inclusive practices (Clough and Lindsay, 1991; Forlin, 1995) and more recent studies report student teachers holding very positive attitudes to inclusion (Lambe and Bones, 2006). Conversely, other studies suggest that attitudes towards inclusion improve over time as experience and skills in implementing inclusion grow (Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden, 2000).

Cook (2002) acknowledges that while a positive attitude toward inclusion may be significant it is not the only prerequisite for inclusion to succeed. He, along with Booth, Nes and Stromstad (2003), stresses the importance of training and identifies teacher development as being central to initiatives for developing inclusive practices in schools.

Environment-Related Factors

According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), key variables in the educational environment influencing teacher attitude to inclusion include the availability of support services. Physical supports such as teaching, information technology resources and an adapted physical environment, and human supports, including the availability of classroom assistants and therapists, school leadership, and specialist resource teachers can influence teachers' attitudes to inclusion. Several studies (Chazan, 1994; Janney, Snell, Beers, and Raynes, 1995) make reference to the importance of consistent support from the head teacher as being critical to developing a positive attitude to the implementation of inclusion. Research in the UK by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson with Farrell, Frankham, Gallannaugh, Howes and Smith (2006) appears to confirm the positive outcome of a collaborative approach where the head teacher is involved with staff in a process of problem-solving, sharing ideas and providing mutual support.

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) assert that, "the school's ethos and the teachers' beliefs have a considerable impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion which,

in turn, are translated into practice” (p. 140). In the Irish context it might be reasonable to expect that where exam success is at the heart of a system of secondary education, attitudes to inclusion would be negatively influenced by this. The growing preoccupation with UK style league tables on university entry and the focus in many schools on academic attainment present a challenge to teachers who are expected to concentrate their efforts on obtaining maximum points for their students in order to secure much sought after places in university (Byrne, 2007). Developing and encouraging a positive attitude to inclusion in the context of the pressures imposed on teachers by what Evans and Lunt (2002) describe as a marketplace influenced philosophy of education, presents a serious challenge for policy makers, school leadership and management, and the teaching profession.

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire survey was used to gather data from the teaching staff at the post primary school where the researcher worked. A survey should take a panoramic view and aim to have as wide a coverage as possible (Denscombe, 2007, p.7) and seemed particularly appropriate as eliciting the perspectives of the entire teaching staff was a priority. As observed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) it was hoped that the anonymity afforded by a questionnaire would encourage participants to be more honest in responding than in an interview. The design of the questionnaire was guided by current literature on research methodology (Robson, 2002; Connolly, 2007), teachers’ attitudes to inclusion and the researcher’s professional observations. A structured questionnaire was designed to explore and understand the impact of some child, teacher and school-related variables on teacher attitude. Informed by the literature reviewed, closed questions sought information on variables including gender, teaching experience, training, subjects taught and the ease with which teachers felt pupils with different disabilities could be included.

A Likert rating scale was included to measure teacher attitude to inclusion (Cohen et al., 2007). Teachers responded to fifteen statements which ranged from their attitudes to the policy of inclusion generally in the school and then more specifically to inclusion in the teacher’s subject area; the degree of training for teaching students with SEN and the desire for more; and other significant environmental factors which might influence teachers’ attitudes to inclusion such as time and class size. A five point scale ranging from 1 (*agree strongly*) to 5 (*disagree strongly*) with a midpoint of 3 (*undecided*) was used. The *undecided* option was included “to avoid fixing the participants response to either of the extremes” (Cohen et al., p. 327). In further recognition that views on an issue such

as inclusion are likely to be complex (Denscombe, 2007) , three open questions were included to give respondents an opportunity to comment in their own words, and raise any issues which may have been omitted in the questionnaire or about which they felt strongly (Bell, 2008). These questions asked respondents to identify the supports available for and factors limiting inclusion, and to identify additional measures which could be taken to enhance inclusive provision in the school. According to Denscombe, information gathered by way of responses to open-ended questions “is more likely to reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent” (p.166).

Following piloting in a neighbouring post-primary school, minor changes were made to the final questionnaire. As described by Munn and Drever (2004), piloting allowed the time for completion to be estimated and enabled the researcher to identify and correct lack of clarity or ambiguity in the questionnaire. Denscombe (2007) emphasises the importance of contact where possible in conducting a questionnaire to maximise the response rate and to put the study into context. The researcher received the permission of the principal to make a brief presentation to staff at which the context and purpose of the questionnaire was outlined, instructions for completion were given and respondents were reminded that participation was entirely voluntary and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Questionnaire data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and summary statistics were calculated. Responses to rank ordered and open questions were analysed by hand.

The findings regarding overall teacher attitude to inclusion and the influence of teacher and child-related variables are presented and discussed in brief with the main focus on reporting and discussing the findings regarding environment-related variables.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A high return rate of ninety-two percent was achieved with seventy-one of seventy-seven teachers surveyed returning a completed questionnaire of whom sixty-five percent (n= 46) were female and thirty-five percent (n=25) were male. The majority at fifty-three percent (n= 38) had been teaching for between four and ten years, thirty-one percent (n=22) had between eleven and thirty-three years teaching experience while fifteen percent (n=11) had been teaching for up to three years. The majority of the participants (sixty-nine percent) said they had received inadequate training for teaching students with SEN in pre-teaching college courses. Thirty-one percent of teachers felt they did not possess adequate skills

and training to teach students with SEN in their classes while thirty-eight percent felt they had

Attitude to Inclusion

Those surveyed overwhelmingly endorsed their personal support for the policy of inclusion with forty-four percent (n= 31) agreeing and forty-six percent (n= 33) strongly agreeing with the policy of teaching students with SEN in mainstream classes at post primary level. Furthermore, teachers of all subjects expressed a willingness to teach students with SEN in their subject area. Some eighty percent agreed that students with SEN benefit from being included in general education classes while eighteen percent were undecided. Fifty-eight percent of respondents felt that typically developing students benefit from being taught in the same class as those with SEN.

Reflecting the findings of Avramidis and Norwich (2002), teacher-related variables did not appear to be influential in terms of the attitudes to inclusion of teachers in this school. There was no significant difference either between the attitudes of female and male teachers or between teachers with and without training in SEN. As regards teaching experience, the attitudes of teachers were equally positive across a broad range of years of experience in contrast to previous studies which report variously more positive attitudes among less experienced (Lambe and Bones, 2006) and more experienced teachers (Avramidis et al., 2000).

Data from this study appears to support the finding of previous studies (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Evans and Lunt, 2002) that the category of disability is significant in terms of teacher attitude. When asked to rank the learning disability they found easiest to include in their teaching, most participants placed dyslexia clearly in first place followed by mild general learning disability. Against that the majority of teachers ranked emotional behavioural difficulties and multiple disabilities as the more difficult SEN to address followed by autism/Asperger syndrome in second place. Regarding 3rd and 6th year exam classes, eighty-seven percent of teachers were willing to include students with SEN, eighty-three percent were willing to modify the curriculum to accommodate such students and ninety-five percent were willing to use differentiation strategies in their classroom teaching.

Supports for Inclusion

As regards human supports, most respondents (eighty-two percent) felt that the level of support provided by the Learning Support team was adequate and in practical subject areas such as physical education, technical graphics and home

economics the majority of participants expressed overall satisfaction with the provision of learning support in the school. Sixty teachers responded to the open question asking them to identify the types of support available to them in teaching students with SEN. Fifty mentioned the support given by the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) while thirty-five referred to the role of the Learning Support team as being vital for the successful inclusion of all students. The importance of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in the mainstream classroom to help students stay on task was also referred to by fifty participants. Other factors seen as providing support were the role of management (3), the strong pastoral care system in place in the school (1), and the willingness of more experienced teaching colleagues to share advice and teaching strategies (2). (The numbers in parentheses refer to the number of respondents in each case.) One respondent referred to the support of parents as helpful in providing more detailed information about students with SEN to teachers.

Challenges to Inclusion

Overall, respondents identified limited time, curriculum content including the pressure to achieve high grades in assessment such as the Leaving Certificate and lack of resources as the main challenges to inclusion. Overall, fifty-two percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they had insufficient time for teaching students with SEN and a further thirty percent were undecided and this concern was reflected across the range of teaching experience.

The responses to an open-ended question in which respondents were asked what limits their teaching students with SEN shed further light on the time issue. As shown in Table 1, forty-two of the sixty-nine teachers who responded identified insufficient time as limiting their ability to include all learners. Of these, eighteen referred simply to time as a limiting factor while twenty-four others cited specific issues notably the length of a class period, time to cover the subject curriculum with all learners as well as limited time for preparation and planning individually and/or in collaboration with colleagues.

Table 1: Teacher responses to limits faced when teaching students with SEN (n=69)

What limits your teaching students with SEN?	No. of responses
• Time (overall)	42
• Time a limiting factor	18
• To include all students with and without SEN	9
• Insufficient class time	6
• To prepare and plan classes	5
• To complete the curriculum	4
• Other factors (overall)	50
• Curriculum content	12
• Pressure to obtain Junior/Leaving Cert. grades	9
• Lack of subject specific resources	7
• Class size	7
• Delay in psychological assessment/diagnosis	7
• Lack of information on specific nature of student's SEN	7
• Inadequate number of SNAs	5

Twelve teachers identified curriculum as a limiting factor while a further nine referred to the pressure to obtain high grades for their students while trying to include the needs of students with SEN. It was felt that the stress of the 'points race' makes inclusion particularly challenging at senior cycle. Teachers welcomed the establishment of modified curricula such as the Leaving Certificate Applied which has provided a working alternative for students with SEN to the more traditionally academic Leaving Certificate. While fifty-one percent of the staff participated in team teaching, the majority of these teachers believed the time available to plan for this was not adequate.

A lack of teaching resources was also reported with teachers of modern languages (French and Spanish) expressing particular dissatisfaction with the level of

teaching materials available to them. The majority of participants (sixty-nine percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they had received inadequate training for teaching students with SEN in initial teacher education courses. While thirty-eight percent of respondents felt they had adequate skills and training to teach students with SEN in their classes, thirty-one percent felt they did not and the remaining thirty-one percent were undecided.

Teacher responses to an open question asking what additional steps the staff could take to ensure the successful implementation of inclusion are shown in Table 2. More than half of those who responded expressed a wish for more in-service training. The issue of resources was again highlighted as was the need for better coordination of existing resources and for more information regarding students' needs.

Table 2: Teacher responses to additional steps staff could take to ensure implementation of the school's inclusion policy (n=53)

Additional steps staff could take to ensure implementation of the school's inclusion policy (n=53)

Multiple responses were given by some participants

- More in-service training (29)
 - More resources (19)
 - Better system to co-ordinate existing resources (16)
 - More information on specific SEN of students (13)
 - More time to plan for needs of SEN students (8)
 - Opportunities to share teaching methodologies (7)
 - Smaller class sizes (3)
 - More SNAs (3)
 - Set up a designated resource library (3)
 - Modified sports equipment for disabled students (1)
 - Extension of class time from 35 to 40 minutes (2)
 - Maintain high expectations (1)
 - The need for teachers to appreciate the challenges posed for students with dyslexia or autistic spectrum disorder etc. (1)
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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Generally, the findings of this study support previous research which suggests that as regards teacher attitude, factors related to the school environment are more influential than either child- or teacher- related factors. Regarding child-related factors, although teachers in this school did perceive students with more significant or complex needs to be more difficult to include, they were positively disposed towards inclusion and willing to adapt curriculum and differentiate teaching for all year groups including Junior and Leaving Certificate exam classes. Nevertheless, time pressures, curriculum content and high-stakes assessment were identified as challenges by many teachers, reflecting the contention of Evan and Lunt (2002, p. 1) that “schools as currently organised frequently find it difficult to meet the wide range of individual needs”.

Interestingly, when asked to identify school supports for inclusion, all the responses related to human resources available in the school chiefly the SENCO, Learning Support team and SNAs, with more experienced colleagues, management, the pastoral care team and parents mentioned by some teachers. This would seem to reflect the kind of collaborative whole-school approach which Ainscow et al. (2006) assert is likely to impact positively on teacher attitude to inclusion. Ainscow (1994) observes that in general the expertise required to teach all students effectively is typically found amongst the teaching staff of the mainstream school. The challenge for managers is to provide the time to staff to profit from this well of knowledge and skills in allowing such collaboration to occur.

While school personnel were seen as supportive, teachers identified a need for other school-related supports notably more time for teaching, planning and collaboration, training and resources. Because of the way a school day is organised at post primary level, the portion of time available for a subject teacher to develop a relationship with those who have learning difficulties differs greatly from that of a primary teacher. Furthermore, in this school classes last on average thirty-five minutes which some teachers found too short to teach all learners with and without SEN.

While participants were clearly in favour of including all students in their classrooms, they were keenly aware of the need to learn the skills necessary to truly meet the needs of all students. Included pupils are more successful when their teachers have the knowledge and ability to adapt curriculum to meet their needs (Ring and Reetz, 2000). It would seem right therefore to build on such

willingness by providing the training required to develop such skills. A significant difference between primary and post-primary school is that in the latter the prime focus is on course work. Attainment of certification at state examinations requires greater emphasis be placed on covering the many subject curricula at post primary level. In the experience of the first author as a teacher in the school, managers and teachers actively seek a balance between the holistic approach found at primary school and the more subject-focused approach at post-primary. The strong pastoral care system and the team of counsellors working in this school contribute to addressing the welfare of all its students. However, there is evidence from this study that teachers want modified materials and adapted subject specific resources. The SENCO and Learning Support team could build on the existing goodwill and collaborative practice in the school to work with subject teachers in sourcing appropriate materials for a resource library which could be made available to all staff to assist them in meeting the needs of all students.

It must be acknowledged that this is a very small scale study which focused on the attitudes of the staff in only one post primary school. The findings therefore must be viewed as being limited in their scale of representation and detail. However some issues for possible future research were raised. In contrast to other studies, among this one teaching staff there was no evidence of differences in attitude among male and female teachers, those with more and less experience or those with and without training in SEN. The finding that all teachers expressed broadly positive views regarding inclusion may be reflective of a welcoming school ethos in which, rather than being seen as problematic, diversity is welcomed and embraced. Arguably, this school's culture is an area worthy of further research, perhaps involving detailed interviews, to provide insight into firstly how such a positive approach is fostered and developed and is disseminated through the school and secondly the nature of the curricular and assessment dilemmas faced by teachers in including students with SEN. Staff in similar post primary schools may like to consider this research and reflect on the extent to which they might apply these findings also.

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REACH LETTERBOX

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