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The Children's Voice: What Makes Students Feel Included?

This article reports the findings from a study of 191 students from six schools (three primary and three post-primary) on what makes them feel included in school. The key themes that emerged were: playing games together, being included in all activities, having friends and the presence of a positive school atmosphere. Other themes that came to the fore included: engagement with specific subjects (art and physical education), group activities, relating with teachers and the role of the principal.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, schools and classrooms across Ireland have undergone exponential change in terms of pupil diversity (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 1999a; Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), 2004; Conway and Sloane, 2005). This has occurred mainly because of two significant developments; a large number of very diverse populations of immigrants arriving as a result of increased economic prosperity, and the passing of the Education Act (Ireland, 1998) which established the right to an appropriate education for all children. This change led to a large body of legislation being enacted and complemented by circulars, task force reports, research, practical guidelines and curricular planning, all of which have influenced thinking, policy(ies) and practice(s) around inclusive education. Yet, there are no explicit definitions of inclusion in either of the two most important acts written for Irish education in the last fifteen years, the Education Act or the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSSEN) (Ireland, 2004).

Slee (2001) suggests:

inclusion is more than resources to assist mobility or to provide access to the dominant language or different forms of information and instruction...It is a cultural calculus wherein we evaluate and question the relative values

afforded to different people and groups of people through the culture of schools and classrooms (p. 117).

Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) define inclusion:

as reducing barriers to learning and participation for all students; as increasing the capacity of schools to respond to the diversity of students in their local communities in ways that treat them all as of equal value; and the putting of inclusive values into action in education and society (p. 297).

Ainscow et al.'s definition emphasises the pivotal importance of all stakeholders within the school community i.e. parents, principals, teachers, other school staff and the students, for the development of an inclusive environment. More importantly it recognises that inclusion encompasses all learners and that they have as vital a part to play in its development as adults. However, so often the views of the child are ignored by adults, be they policy makers, educators or researchers.

Since the 1980s there has been a general acceptance that children have views and opinions separate from their adult carers, and that they play an active role in the development of their own lives. With this acceptance comes the acknowledgement that children have rights: "Having a right means having the power to command respect, to make claims and to have them heard" (Federle, 1994, p. 343). In 2006, the Committee on the Rights of the Child reiterated this when it recommended that the State party must ensure that children have "the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have those views given due weight, in particular in families, schools and other educational institutions, the health sector and in communities" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006, p. 6). The inclusion agenda is a matter that affects children in school. While a wide range of research has been carried out exploring the various aspects of the inclusion question, these have mainly been through accessing and reporting the relevant adult stakeholders' views and perspectives (Idol, 2006; Avramidis and Kalyva, 2007; Forlin, Mei-Lan Au and Chong, 2008; Miller, Cooper, Cook and Petch, 2008; Runswick-Cole, 2008). There is a dearth of research seeking the views of the children as stakeholders on the issue (O'Keeffe, 2009). This study sought to ascertain children's views on how schools can make them feel included.

METHODOLOGY

The study sought, inter alia, to ascertain how schools are addressing the challenges and barriers to fostering inclusive practices. It examined differing

contexts (rural, urban, primary, post-primary), age groups and diverse populations (children with special educational needs (SEN), students from the traveller community, students experiencing educational disadvantage and minority ethnic and/or minority language population, students not from these groups). Six schools in total were chosen following consultation with key informants in the system. The student views were sought through interviews and questionnaires.

Ten students in total were interviewed (six primary and four post-primary students). They were chosen in consultation with the participating schools (Table 1).

Table 1: Profiles of students interviewed

Student	Age	School	Class/level	Inclusion focus
Boy	8	Primary A	2nd	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
Boy	8	Primary A	2nd	Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
Girl	10	Primary B	3rd	Minority ethnic/minority language
Boy	14	Primary B	6th and special class	Mild general learning disabilities and ASD
Boy	8	Primary C	2nd	Minority ethnic/minority language
Boy	8	Primary C	2nd	Minority ethnic/minority language
Boy	13	Post-primary D	1st year	Awaiting assessment
Girl	16	Post-primary D	3rd year	Mild general learning disabilities
Boy	15	Post-primary F	3rd year	ASD
Adult	18	Post-primary F	Transition year	Moderate general learning disabilities

The schedule used to interview the adult stakeholders was simplified for the students. They were asked if they felt included in the school, if anything that made

them feel not included, and if there was anything people in the school could do to make them feel more included. For some of the students interpreters were used.

As the number of students interviewed was limited, a questionnaire was considered an appropriate method of accessing the views of a wider group of students. Creative and flexible approaches were adopted to provide opportunities for all students to express their views (Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Rabiee, Sloper and Beresford, 2005). As the study spanned primary and post-primary schools, two different versions of the questionnaire were designed. In both cases, a definition of inclusion was written on the questionnaire and read to the students. The layout of the questionnaire was attractive and colourful and included pictures to engage the students. Clear and simple language was used throughout and a sentence completion technique was utilised to provide students with an opportunity to give open-ended comments (Wade and Moore, 1993). The research questions were mirrored in the questionnaire, they included whether or not students feel they belong in their school and what makes them feel they belong or do not belong. They were then asked how a number of different people (children, teachers, school principal, other people) could make the school a better place where people could feel included or feel that they belong.

Questionnaires were administered to a junior and a senior class, both in the primary and post-primary schools. The purpose of the study was explained to the students who were then given an opportunity to ask questions. It was also reiterated that participation in the study was voluntary and that students could seek clarification at any stage throughout the process by raising a hand (Lewis, 2004). Primary school students, or children for whom writing was not an option, were given a simpler version of the questionnaire where they had the choice of drawing or writing a comment. The two researchers and at least one staff member who were present during the completion of the questionnaires were prepared to read items aloud for the students or act as scribes. Students who chose to draw to illustrate their views were invited to write the message that the drawing conveyed or to access the support of a scribe, as drawings can be ambiguous and difficult to interpret (Dockrell, Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). A further consideration when researching with children is the increased likelihood of acquiescence (Finlay and Lyons, 2002). To reduce the risk of acquiescence and of influencing or distorting the message when reading or scribing, researchers liaised with school staff about the purpose of the questionnaire and the importance of safeguarding the integrity of the student's voice (Lewis and Porter, 2007). The process took approximately thirty-five to forty-five minutes in each class. A total of 181 questionnaires were completed and used in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the perspectives of students on what makes them feel included in their schools, based on the findings from questionnaire responses and individual interviews yielded the following themes: playing games together, being included in all activities, having friends and generally having a positive school atmosphere. A number of other themes that emerged related to engaging with specific subjects (physical education (PE) and art) and group activities and relating to teachers. An additional theme relating to the role of the principal emerged and this will be considered separately.

Playing Games Together

The most common theme to emerge when students were asked what makes them feel included in their schools was the theme of “playing games together” (sixty-three references) and the social aspect of play, before school, after school and at break times. A similar theme emerged when students were asked how they might make each other feel included in the school. Responses referred to doing things together (fifty-four references) such as “playing together” or “working together” and “not leaving people out”. A variety of games are mentioned – basketball, football, skipping, dodgeball and hopscotch. Many of the statements are descriptions of drawings of children playing games with everyone included:

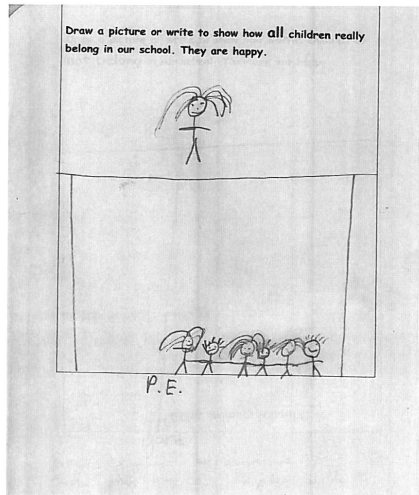
–My class are playing outside together (1st class, primary school A)

–I think everybody belongs in our school because we have so many activities like soccer, and basketball, and table tennis, and hurling (3rd class, primary school B)

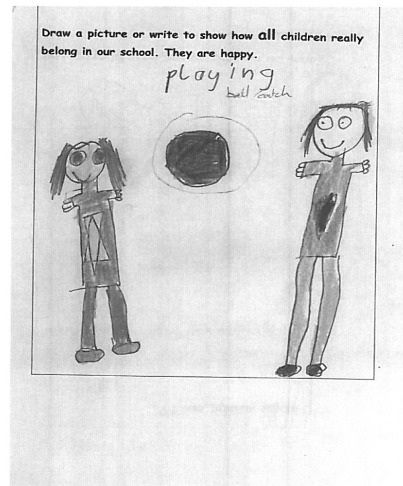
–If someone wants to come into your game, letting them join in (3rd class, primary school B).

“Playing games together” appears to be a theme that is afforded very high status by the students in making them feel included in their schools. While there is a link with the theme of friendship, which is discussed later, the concept of playing games together is unique and warrants consideration in its own right. As illustrated in the drawings (Figure 1), it appears to epitomise for students what inclusion is about. There is some evidence from the literature which indicates that for ethnic minority boys, being good at sport facilitated their inclusion in distinct male peer groups (Devine and Kelly, 2006). However, the high status of the theme “playing games together” as perceived by the students in the present study raises

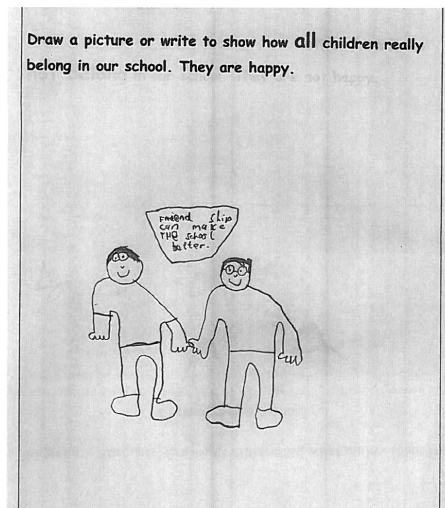
concerns about the inclusion of students who may have difficulties or a lack of interest in playing games and in social interaction for a variety of reasons.



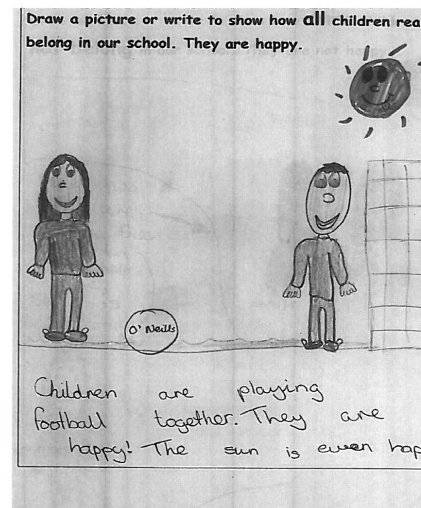
1st class, primary school A



1st class, primary school A



2nd class, primary school C



2nd class, primary school C

Figure 1: Students' drawings illustrating what makes them feel included in their school

Being Included in All Activities

This theme is very closely linked to the previous theme of playing games together and relates to being given the same opportunities as all other children in the school. The following quotes illustrate yet again the views of students on what makes them feel included in their schools and the importance of playing together, and not leaving anybody out:

–They’re playing soccer. All the children are included (3rd class, primary school B)

–The children in (name of school) like to share and help each other and no one is left out. They are caring and loving. If someone doesn’t want to play the game we’re playing they would play a different game (5th class, primary school B).

When asked in the questionnaire how students can make other students feel included, the same theme of “not leaving people out” and “including everyone no matter who they are or where they come from” emerged from the primary school students. One senior post-primary student suggested “asking a student that is sitting on their own during break to sit with you or involve quiet students into a game of football” while another suggested “to arrange a few sessions once or twice a week with groups from every year and ask them about how they would like to feel more included”.

Other terms used by the students included: being “kind”, “nice” and “friendly” to other students (twenty-eight references). While primary school students did not elaborate beyond these terms, many (sixteen) post-primary students were direct but eloquent in their suggestions for a more tolerant and inclusive school environment:

–Be kind, participate, help others feel included, be friendly

–Be nicer! Some students take a while before they’re even comfortable raising their hand

–Encouragement (not jeering) would help, and everyone with a sense of decency should cast out an olive branch to their fellow students, whether they get on well immediately or not

–Be nicer to each other and treat everybody equal, whether Irish or not, black or white doesn’t matter.

Positive Atmosphere

The next most common theme to emerge was related to the positive atmosphere in the school, which contributes to making all children feel included. The following quotes illustrate the students' perceptions of a positive school atmosphere that contributes to making them feel included in their school:

–All the children sharing their paint in art (1st class, primary school A)

–Everyone feels happy and friendly in our school. It is great to help others (3rd class, primary school B)

–All children belong in our school because we all make each other welcome, we play together, we share, we help each other, we welcome each other in our community and be nice to each other (2nd class, primary school C).

Themes of “sharing” and “helping each other” were also evident in the findings when students were asked how they could make each other feel included.

There is evidence of similar findings in a study by Norwich and Kelly (2004) where the majority of students with mild general learning difficulties who were attending both special and mainstream schools expressed mainly positive feelings about their current school. There was no difference between primary and post-primary students in the feelings expressed. A positive school ethos helped students to acclimatise in first year of post-primary school and supported the transition process from primary to post-primary school (NCCA, 2004).

Friends

An important aspect of inclusion according to the findings of this study is that students should have friends in the school for playing, talking, and listening:

–Friendship can make the school better (2nd class, primary school C)

–All children really belong in school when they make friends to play with. Every child should have a friend (5th class, primary school B)

–The thing make students feel good is when they came in school meet some friends even he/her mad about something happened at home he will still be happy (5th year, post-primary school F).

The importance of friendships is a common theme in studies that elicit the views of children (O'Donnell, 2003; Rooney, 2003; Devine and Kelly, 2006). More in-depth studies of friendships and peer relations highlight the complexity of the social world for students (Meyer, 2001; Devine and Kelly). Students in the present study referred to friends as "people to talk to and listen". Similarly, friendship as an informal system of support at schools was mentioned by students in the research literature (Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Palikara, Lindsay and Dockrell, 2009). While the nature of friendship was not investigated in the present study, the findings indicate that students view friends as a very important element of inclusion in their schools.

Engaging in Extra-Curricular Activities and Particular Subject Areas

Students, particularly at post-primary level, mentioned the range of extra-curricular and social activities as a factor that contributes to inclusion in school. These included school assemblies, school plays, school trips, basketball and football teams, choir, table tennis, dancing and time to talk in the canteen where students have an opportunity to develop friendships:

–Emphasis towards all skills. I believe that this school allows students who are not good at academics but good at other talent (e.g. music) to develop and flourish (5th year, post-primary school F)

–If they're having lunch together in the cafeteria (1st year, post-primary school E)

–There is a lot of extra activities after and during school for students to take part in and feel a part of a group an example of such activities are football, table tennis, dancing, choir and also there is always (someone) you can talk to in the school if your feeling down (5th year, post-primary school F).

Alongside PE, art was the only other school subject specifically mentioned with any frequency. In addition to practical tasks and activity learning, these presumably are the subjects children can express themselves most freely in or enjoy the most. This makes them feel included:

–All the children like to do art (1st class, primary school A)

–When everyone is together like PE (5th class, primary school B).

There is evidence to support the views of students in the present study in relation to a preference for certain school subjects. Across three phases of a longitudinal study of students' first three years of post-primary education, students indicated a preference for practical subjects such as art, woodwork, home economics, computer studies and PE (NCCA, 2004; 2006; 2007). This trend is also evident in a study by Riley (2004) where students reported that they liked school because of the opportunities to engage in PE and sport.

Teachers

Teachers in school contributed to making students feel included. In general, students portrayed their teachers in a positive light, making references to teachers being "nice" and having "fun" learning with the teacher:

–...playing games in the class with the teacher... (1st year, post-primary school E)

–...Also most of the teachers are really nice and make you feel welcome and confident in school (5th year, post-primary school F)

–They are having fun learning with the teacher (2nd class, primary school C)

–When teacher is teaching them (1st class, primary school A)

–There is no 'wall' between students and teachers – everybody's talking to each other (5th year, post-primary school F).

These findings are in agreement with the research literature where children in general perceive their teachers to be kind and caring and want to have a positive relationship with them (Devine, 2003; Vekic, 2003; Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Riley 2004). A study of inclusion of students having social and emotional difficulties in mainstream schools (Mowat, 2009) also identified the relationship between the teachers and students as one of the most significant variables affecting student outcomes. Voices of minority ethnic and minority language children with regard to educational experiences (Vekic, 2003) indicate that students were happy in school and prioritised the role that the staff and the teachers played in this.

A trend that emerged across the research literature was the reference by students to the characteristics of good teaching (NCCA, 2004; 2006; 2007). Students in this longitudinal study referred to the benefits of clear explanations, group work and

practical activities. Students in another study also appreciated teachers who helped them understand their work and who responded to individual requests for help (Riley, 2004). Similar themes related to the craft of teaching (forty-six references) emerged in the present study when students were specifically asked how teachers could help to make children feel included in school. Many primary school students felt that teachers could achieve this by “teaching”, “teaching new things”, “teaching a lot” but did not elaborate beyond these comments. Older primary students were more specific in their responses and made suggestions that teachers could help by “making sure that every child understand their work” and “constantly encouraging students and not picking the same student for every question”. Post-primary students suggested that teachers “bring more variation into class”, “do more group work or class activities that everyone gets to know people”. The merits of team-teaching were recognised in an individual interview:

–I prefer the two because if one teacher says something you can ask the other teacher what he meant, like if I was in class with one and one is off talking, with two teachers I could ask the other teacher (3rd year, post-primary school E).

How teachers can make a difference in delivering inclusive practice is discussed by Florian (2008) where the relationship between special and inclusive education are examined. She argues that inclusive practice is more than differentiation and that teachers need to take on a broader role involving “an understanding of the interactive socio-cultural factors that interact to produce individual differences (biology, culture, family, school), rather than explanations that stress a single cause” (p. 206). Expectations of this broader role for teachers in inclusive practices are reflected in the voices of the students in the present study.

Principal

One theme that occurred across all the schools (fifteen references) was the need for the principal to communicate with the students and listen to their voices. Comments from primary students included: “ask how the student was”, “ask the children how they feel and think” and “talk to all students”.

A 5th year, post-primary student made a plea to the principal for the voices of students to be listened to and heard: “To be more friendly and listen to the students views as well as just the teachers. As I think many students don’t be heard that it’s just teachers”.

While the right to have their views heard emerged as a theme in the responses from students, there was also evidence in their comments of a welfarist role for

the principal. A perception of the principal as a caring benefactor emerged from the findings from primary school students in particular who used terms such as: "... going into the classes and telling pupils how good they are", "taking care" and "helping" with one young person making the suggestion that the principal should "give students support, make them feel comfortable in the school". Linked to this theme is their perception of the role of the principal as the person with power to award extra privileges and activities including increasing the number of activities during break times and after school (eleven references). Suggestions for activities made by students included sports clubs, shows, exercises, mathematics and Irish clubs.

The principal was also perceived by students as having an influence on discipline issues (eighteen references), specifically the making of rules and dealing with bullies, which would help students feel that they belong in the school. The voices of the students are intent in their plea to the authority of the principal to stop meanness and bullying supporting the very forceful comments of the students in the earlier section of the study on challenges and barriers to inclusion:

- Telling them to stop being mean*
- Telling them to be nice*
- Not letting bullies get away with what they are doing*
- I think he could stop people bullying*
- Give serious punishment to **anyone** who is bullying.*

General

The following quotes, from primary and post-primary students, capture the essence of students' perspectives on inclusion or feeling that they belong in school:

-I think all children belong in school. We're the ones who make it a school not one of us all of us it's no school without people who really try hard to make it such a good school like the President is coming but she would not like it without all of us (2nd class, primary school C)

- When people don't bully you*
- When people don't leave you out*
- When they have friends*
- When the teachers don't give out to them (1st year, post-primary school E).*

CONCLUSION

An aim of the primary school curriculum (NCCA, 1999b) is “to enable the child to develop as a social being through living and co-operating with others and so contribute to the good of society” (p. 7). Findings from the study indicate that students are more preoccupied with the social aspects of school life than on academic practices. Playing games together, friendships, engaging in activities before and after school all indicate a social culture that students have to negotiate and navigate on a daily basis. Teachers play an important role in developing social awareness and understanding and in explicit teaching of skills to enhance social relationships between learners. It is important to move away from an emphasis on welfare towards students who are marginalised and from the concept that social inclusion is defined by the ability and willingness of more able students to support those who are less able (Devine and Kelly, 2006).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The curriculum areas of social, personal and health education (SPHE) and civic, social and political education (CSPE) should be mediated to the student through integration with other subjects and in specifically allocated curriculum time (NCCA, 1999b). Teachers need to be sensitive to the friendship patterns among children in classrooms so that they can plan more effectively and create learning opportunities that allow for the development of social relationships. Co-operative learning groups, for example, are effective in providing meaningful opportunities for interaction and exchange leading to the development of friendships. As “playing games together” was afforded high status by the students in overcoming barriers to inclusion, students should be taught the rules and procedures of games that are commonly played at break periods to facilitate their participation. Mentoring approaches and buddy systems should be developed and evaluated at school level to support the inclusion of students. It is also important that schools accommodate students who find the playground overwhelming and who would benefit from a quiet area or alternative activities at break-times.

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