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Students' Views of Special Schooling: Do 'Dilemmas of Difference' Apply?

What do students think about being in a special school? This paper describes how the views of students in one Irish special school were gathered and analysed. The study explored how the concept of 'dilemmas of difference' might apply to the views of these students.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a research project which took place in one Irish special school, where the views of students about their experiences of schooling were sought. The aim of the study was to enable, hear and give weight to their views and to assess if tensions existed for these students about attending a special school.

Enabling, Hearing and Giving Weight to Children's Views

There is a growing acceptance that young people have a right to be involved in decision making which affects them (Rose and Shevlin, 2003; Jones, 2005), and their voice is seen as being central to policy considerations (Andrews, 2010). Children are acknowledged as actors who 'speak' in their own right and report valid views and experiences (Wyness, 2000; Waldron, 2006) rather than as subjects or objects of research (Kellett, Forrest, Dent and Ward, 2004; Alderson, 2005; Whyte, 2005). A body of literature exists on children's participation (Cavet and Sloper, 2004; Coyne, 2010) and a substantial stimulus for involving children in decision making related to themselves is provided by Article 12 (1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child (United Nations, 1989, p. 4).

In Ireland, children's participation and the need for those in positions of power and responsibility, including researchers, to listen to the views of children, has been

the focus of much comment (Ireland, 2000; Devine, 2003; Rose and Shevlin, 2003; Butler-Scally, 2004; Pinkerton, 2004; Coyne, 2010). National policy in this area is set out in Goal One of the National Children's Strategy and in the revised, although not yet operational 'Children First' guidelines (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2010). The recent historic appointment of a dedicated Minister for Children to Government, and this Minister's commitment to "supporting children and enhancing families by having an emphasis on children's rights in the Constitution" (Fitzgerald, 2011), signifies that children's rights will remain a political priority in the coming years.

Listening to Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities have been, it is claimed, "largely excluded from consultations and involvement in decisions which affect them" (Rabiee, Sloper and Beresford, 2005, p. 385), and it has been noted that children with disabilities in Ireland face additional barriers to having their voices heard (Kilkelly, 2007). In recent times there is greater recognition of the need to hear from "those who would not previously have been seen as able to form a valid view" (Ware, 2004, p. 175). People with learning disabilities are now seen as reliable informants who hold valid opinions and have a right to express them – a view reflected by calls for research that includes them as participants (Lewis and Porter, 2004).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that this study specifically addressed were:

1. (a) What do students who have been assessed as having mild general learning disabilities have to say about their experiences and perspectives of special schooling?
(b) What are these students' perspectives of mainstream schools, in comparison to the special school which they attend?
2. To what extent do students feel that they have a say in matters that affect them in relation to their education?
3. Do 'dilemmas of difference' apply for students who attend this special school? (i.e. the extent to which the views of students might reflect a tension between the positive and negative consequences of attending a special school).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students' Views of Schooling

There is a wide range of literature exploring students' views of schooling. For example, in 'The School I'd Like' project (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003) children

described in a variety of formats (essays, pictures, stories, plays, designs, poems, plans, photographs) the school they would like. Suggestions for school improvement included those related to the physical environment such as more comfortable furniture, more time and space to play, and clean lockable toilets (Burke and Grosvenor). Children wanted opportunities to learn outside of school and class boundaries, and had a strong aversion to school uniforms and to the 'regulated and segmented patterns of the school day' (Burke and Grosvenor). Fear of, or actual accounts of, being bullied featured regularly, while many children wished for teachers who were kind, funny and happy, who listened to and respected children, and who did not shout.

In Ireland, a longitudinal study of the first three years of second-level education was carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) between 2002 and 2005. First-year students tended to have mixed feelings about starting secondary school, with many feeling both excited and nervous. A positive school climate helped students to acclimatise and to make more progress academically, although many students, particularly boys, reported being bullied (Smyth, McCoy, and Darmody, 2004). Students indicated a preference for subjects with a practical orientation (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2004). The second and third strands of the study corroborated findings from the first strand. Students generally became less positive about school as they got older (NCCA, 2007) and the informal school atmosphere continued to have a significant influence on how students fared (Smyth, Dunne, McCoy and Darmody, 2006). Students were more likely to like school if they had positive interactions with teachers, while bullying was also less of a concern for students where a positive school climate prevailed (Smyth, Dunne, Darmody and McCoy, 2007).

The Views of Students with Disabilities

A UK study of 101 children with disabilities found that only one in six of fifty special school students expressed mainly positive views of mainstream schools while twenty-seven of fifty-one students in mainstream schools held positive perspectives on special schools (Norwich and Kelly, 2004; Norwich and Kelly, 2005). Eighty-three per cent of participants had experienced some form of bullying, either from students in their own school, students in other mainstream schools or neighbours and peers outside school. The authors concluded that bullying is pervasive for students receiving special education, regardless of placement, but students in special schools were more likely to be bullied by peers outside their own school (Norwich and Kelly, 2004).

Another relevant study found that students with disabilities were pleased with the support they received from adults in school, and there was little evidence that they

felt stigmatised or uncomfortable with this help (Lewis, Parsons, and Robertson, 2007). This study found that special schools made great efforts to provide as wide and varied a curriculum as possible. However, many of the students involved had experienced peer bullying, usually in school but sometimes outside of school.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Analysis

The project consisted of a range of qualitative research strategies, gathered in five separate phases (Table 1). Multiple data collection procedures (focus groups, interviews, participatory exercises, written and pictorial contributions) were used to gather information over a sustained period of time (thirteen months). The active participation of students was a key element of the project (Creswell, 2003; Waldron, 2006).

Table 1: Summary of each of the phases of data collection

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Participants/ Eligible Total</i>	<i>% Participating</i>
<i>Phase 1</i>	Introductory gathering of views of all students	Class-based focus groups	59/100	59%
<i>Phase 2</i>	Gathering of views of school leavers; build on Phase 1 data	Interviews (pairs and individual)	9/18	50%
<i>Phase 3</i>	Gathering of views of students who had attended other second-level schools	Individual interviews	6/6	100%
<i>Phase 4</i>	Participatory element; including new students	Class-based focus groups	15/23	65%
<i>Phase 5</i>	Final views from all students; utilising alternative data collection strategies	Written and pictorial contributions	Up to 99/125 (53 anonymous)	Up to 79%

In the initial phase of the study (a series of ten focus group meetings) participants indicated through discussion the themes which they felt were important to them. This was in keeping with the belief that young people should decide what it is that matters to them (Lundy, 2007). This opportunity for participants to set the agenda was facilitated by beginning each focus group with the open-ended question: "If you knew somebody who was starting in this school next September, what would you tell them about the school?" Given this wide initial focus and the subsequent organic development of different methods of data collection and analysis, the term 'emergent design' or 'flexible design' (Robson, 2002) is appropriate for this study. Data gathered were stored, coded and sorted electronically, using *nVivo 7* software, which facilitated in-depth analysis.

Dissemination of Information

A key element to this project was appropriate dissemination of information. A notice board was erected in the school hall and information displayed on this explained the project in student-friendly format, using questions, minimal text and images. An easy-to-read final report was also presented to every student and staff member in the school at the conclusion of the project.

INITIAL FINDINGS

Generally, students spoke very positively about many aspects of their school. They held very positive views about staff, highlighting many examples of their kindness, helpfulness and friendliness. While students generally spoke positively about their peers in the school, some criticism of fellow students was expressed. This tension between positive and negative views of peers echoes findings from a study with a similar student profile (Norwich and Kelly, 2005), in which participants said that they were very happy that friends helped them with their work and played with them, but also remarked on incidents of bullying or teasing. The data confirm that students with special educational needs are susceptible to being bullied, not only in their own school, but also in their out-of-school interactions with other people, particularly people of their own age in their own communities, and in previous schools they had attended.

The views expressed about curriculum were predominantly positive. Students' preference for practical subjects suggests that their views are more similar than dissimilar to the views of their peers in mainstream second-level schools (Smyth et al., 2006; Smyth et al., 2007). In respect of school organisation and environment, there are many parallels between the views of the participants in this study and the views of a wider, diverse group of students (Burke and Grosvenor,

2003). Students were unhappy about litter, old windows, doors, floors and computers, chairs that were too small, poor heating in the hall, small rooms and untidy classrooms. They wanted new paint, new chairs, an improved play yard and lockable toilets. Others commented that they liked the paint, flowers, paintings, sports facilities and computers. The views expressed indicate the importance of the physical environment to students.

Do ‘Dilemmas of Difference’ Apply?

The central question that this study sought to answer was whether or not students experienced ‘difference’ in any way by attending a special school, and if so, to what extent this posed a dilemma for them. Three dilemmas are highlighted in the literature: dilemmas of identification, curriculum and location (Norwich and Kelly, 2005; Norwich, 2008). The dilemmas are discussed below. Students’ comments are utilised to portray how views expressed illustrate these dilemmas.

The Dilemma of Identification

The dilemma of identification is concerned with whether or not certain students should be identified as needing special education. Doing so can provide the appropriate resources but can also potentially lead to stigma and devaluation and possible negative self-concept (Norwich, 2008). The dilemma is that there ‘cannot be additional provision...without some individual identification’ (Norwich and Kelly, 2005). Tensions around identification did arise, for at least some students. This is not just specifically about whether children are identified for the purposes of providing special education (Norwich, 2008), but also includes an extension of this – identification of the students by others, through use of labels or by judging them, often in a demeaning or hurtful way. Some students came to an ‘official realisation of difference’, through realising that they are given an official categorisation/label. Sometimes this realisation may have been influenced by parents, as the following comment testifies:

My mom and dad said, you know your learning difficulties, you go to this school and it will help you to learn.

Others faced the dilemma of identification through a more subversive or ‘unofficial realisation of difference’ – the negative and hurtful comments from others in their families, schools or communities. This awareness of the views of others was quite prevalent in the testimonies of students, and it appeared that a stigma was felt by at least some participants which stemmed from being seen as ‘different’ by others. The name-calling and bullying to which some students were subjected represented a negative dimension to their lives:

Other teachers and students from other schools will say 'oh look at them they're a bunch of retards or whatever' but we're not and we know we're not that but trying to explain that to someone who's starting here they'll think 'oh why am I sent to this school have I done something wrong or why are they calling me a retard'?

Other students appeared happy with the school, and did not indicate that they felt burdened with any dilemma about their identification or identity. Notwithstanding these views, many were conscious of their difference, and of how others may view them. One stated that he would not disclose to others that he attended a special school because: "they might call me a retard".

The Dilemma of Curriculum

The dilemma of curriculum centres around whether a 'common curriculum' with the same learning experiences should be provided to children, irrespective of their learning abilities and needs (Norwich, 2008). Providing a common curriculum risks denying some students the opportunity of having relevant learning experiences, while not doing so means these students are likely to be treated as a separate lower status group. Students' views on curriculum matters were generally very positive. Students expressed a preference for certain subjects over others, and some also indicated clearly which additional subjects they would have liked to study. Overall, the data suggest that a curriculum dilemma did not arise for the students in this study. The opportunity to access certification programmes similar to their peers in mainstream education (Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied) and the appropriate pace and level of work were positives for students.

In this sense there was a difference of degree in relation to curriculum, but this did not appear to create a dilemma for students. The views expressed by students suggest that the school appears to have successfully merged a second-level model of provision with a primary-level model of care. Rather than students feeling stigmatised or devalued, this balanced approach to curriculum actually contributes to their positive outlook on school. Students appeared content about any difference in curriculum or learning that they might experience from their peers, and the commonalities in programmes accessed meant that this difference did not appear to translate into 'lower status', as Norwich (2008) suggests may be the outcome. It may also reflect that for students "the social dimensions of classroom life often take precedence over the academic" (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p. 102).

The Dilemma of Location

The dilemma of location is concerned with where children with special educational needs are taught: either in regular classrooms where they may not receive access to scarce and specialist services and facilities, or in specialised provision, which may cause a sense of exclusion and lack of acceptance by other children (Norwich, 2008). The 'special school' nature of the location of this study makes this difference one of kind, rather than degree. Did a dilemma of location apply? It appears that this dilemma did manifest itself for at least some students. Initially, at least, some students resented coming to a special school:

I wanted to go to a different school, 'cos I didn't really understand it at first or understand why I had to come here. Then my mom and dad sat me down and said you've to go to this school 'cos you've got difficulties with learning in your old school...I felt scared...My mom said to me they'll help you.

The views expressed by one school leaver show remarkable insight and reflection:

Interviewer: *At the start were you unhappy to be here?*

Student: *I didn't understand why I was sent here, as I got a little older I started to like it. This is the right place for me...When I came up here I was a bit troublesome because I didn't understand why I was up here, and what was I supposed to do here, it actually took me a good two years to settle.*

Interviewer: *What are your impressions now as you are leaving?*

Student: *Love it, don't want to leave.*

The location dilemma manifested itself in ambiguous feelings expressed by some students. Students' satisfaction with the school was tempered by a sense of unease with what the school signified and represented in the wider community, and how others might perceive them by virtue of their attendance at a special school. For some, disclosure was not an option they could countenance:

I'm not saying I'm embarrassed about the school but it is kind of embarrassing in a way... People would be asking where do you go...I got my way out of that by saying do you know where it is then they say where is it so I say ah it's too long to explain so you get away with it in a way.

A related 'location dilemma' manifested itself, not about the 'special school' nature of the school, but about the actual physical location of the school. The school is adjacent to and closely linked to administration offices and other education and care facilities of a voluntary agency which supports people of all

ages with intellectual disabilities. This co-location on one campus was viewed very negatively by some students. Visible signage outside the school grounds identifying the agency was a clear negative for some students. It seems to indicate that the school's 'difference' would be more acceptable to at least some of the students if it were located in a different area, and not directly associated, in a physical/locational sense at least, with a disability services provider.

In contrast, another student spoke powerfully about how people with learning difficulties in the past did not get the opportunities that they would get today, and saw clearly the benefits of attending the special school:

I think it's actually a brilliant school because we're getting a chance that people wouldn't have forty years ago because there's actually loads of people out there I know loads of adults that can't read and can't write they can't do nothing properly for themselves... they see we're getting the opportunity they never got when they were at school. Forty years ago if you had problems or learning difficulties there was nothing like this – they were just thrown to the back of the class and just left there.

A Fourth Dilemma

The data suggest that a fourth dilemma applies in this specific context, which is related to matters of school structure and organisation. I refer to it as the 'status dilemma' as it centres on the anomalous status of the school as a special national (first-level) school catering exclusively for students of second-level age. This anomaly makes this difference one of kind, rather than of degree. The school's uniqueness in catering exclusively for students of second-level age within primary school structures allows a great deal of autonomy, which has been of benefit in managing and creating an appropriate curriculum. Yet, in catering exclusively for this age group while operating within primary school administrative structures, some students felt aggrieved at certain aspects that made their school 'different' to other second-level schools. They felt they were unfairly treated in comparison to their peers in mainstream schools. This manifested itself in gripes about over-supervision, not being allowed to leave school at lunchtime, or play certain sports, and a request for a greater range of subjects.

The greatest indicators of difference, however, were the perceived injustices felt by students in comparison to those in other schools in terms of school year and timetabling. One of these concerned the practice of other second-level schools in the area having half-days on Wednesdays; the other was that the school remains open through June when all mainstream second-level schools have closed:

*In the summer we finish on the 30th and some schools finish on the 4th – how is it that the other gang are off?
No half days, that's bad.*

The dilemma is that while students wished to be treated similarly by having a weekly half-day and by finishing in early June, the current position of a shorter school day was something they were unsure about giving up.

In summary, then, it appears as if a dilemma of difference in relation to identification was apparent for many students in the study. Dilemmas of difference in relation to location and status may apply to a moderate extent for at least some students, whereas the difference in curriculum appeared not to create a dilemma for students in this school.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on enabling, hearing and giving weight to the views of students who attend a special school, and attempted to assess how these views might indicate 'dilemmas of difference' for the students. In attempting to do so, a range of different strategies was used within a flexible research design, with the intention of enabling as many students as possible within the school population to contribute.

What can be said about children's views overall? The nature of special education leaves us with real dilemmas which require 'balancing tensions, accepting less than ideal ways forward and working positively with uncertainties and complexities' (Norwich and Kelly, 2005). In the views of at least some of the students in this study, satisfaction with this particular school is tempered with a negativity associated with both the location of the school and the views of many others in society. In this regard, it appears as if the dilemma of special schooling has not been definitively resolved in this single study, and the debate continues.

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