The Inclusion of a Pupil with Asperger Syndrome in a Mainstream Primary School

This article describes a research project carried out to determine if the curricular and social needs of a pupil with Asperger syndrome could be met through inclusion in a mainstream primary school. Results of the study indicate that the young boy, who is the focus of this research, is not attaining all of his curricular goals and that appropriate social functioning within the mainstream setting presents serious difficulties for him. Names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

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INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen international best practice in special education eschew segregated provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in favour of a more inclusive system where such pupils are educated alongside their typically developing peers (Rose, 2005). The catalyst for this change has been the worldwide shift towards a more inclusive society, one which espouses social justice and equality for all and whose origins lie in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s (Harrow and Dunlap, 2001).

The current investigation was a case study involving a nine year old boy named Karl, who was in third class, and had been diagnosed with Asperger syndrome (AS). The setting was an Irish mainstream primary school in an urban community. The study sought to investigate the concept of inclusion in the context of a pupil with AS and to determine if the social and curricular needs of this pupil were being met in the mainstream setting. The research sought the views of the key partners in the inclusive process, namely parents, teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs), peers and the pupil himself. The investigation revealed positive outcomes of inclusion while identifying the challenges inclusion presents to the educational system in general, and to a pupil with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in particular.

Inclusion

The term "inclusion" evolved from the term "integration" in the 1990s. Integration referred to the placing of a pupil with SEN in a mainstream school, frequently in a special class or unit, often denying the pupil full access to the same curriculum as his non-disabled peers, and sometimes excluding him or her from certain school activities (Farrell, 2001). Inclusion has come to mean the placing of a pupil with SEN in the mainstream class allowing for his or her full participation in all aspects of school life. Inclusion as a philosophy of acceptance, a framework within which all children are treated with respect and provided with equality of opportunity, has been broadly documented in the literature. Advocates of inclusion list its benefits as increased expectation by teachers of the learning potential of pupils with disabilities, exposure to behaviour modelled by non-disabled peers, increased self-esteem on the part of the pupil with SEN and more accepting attitudes on the part of peers leading to less isolation for the pupil with SEN (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2000; Renty and Roeyers, 2005).

Much of the literature, however, highlights the difficulties associated with inclusion and the subsequent successful inclusion of people with disabilities in society. Researchers such as Nabuzoka and Smith (1993) found that pupils with SEN consistently found it more difficult than their non-disabled peers to be accepted into the group. This has consequences for pupils with AS, many of whom may suffer from depression in adolescence or early adulthood, often as a direct result of non-acceptance by peers and an inability to form relationships (Wentzel and Asher, 1995).

Further problems, such as the limited opportunities afforded to mainstream teachers to further their training in the area of SEN teaching, insufficient time for planning and problem-solving within the class teacher's schedule and inadequate collaborative work practices among the various agencies in the field have all been highlighted as barriers to inclusion (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2000; Salend, 2001).

Asperger Syndrome

AS was officially recognised in the tenth revision of the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Diseases (World Health Organisation, 2004) and the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder – DSM-IV – TR (2000), where it is described as one of a group of ASDs. Since Hans Asperger's pioneering paper (Asperger, 1944), a wealth of literature has been produced discussing the condition we have come to know as 'Asperger syndrome'. Wing and Gould (1979) described the "Triad of Impairments", consisting of deficits in the areas of social interaction, communication and flexible thinking, as characteristic of pupils with autism. Wing (1981), having examined Asperger's 1944 paper, outlined further criteria for AS which included peculiar and

pedantic but well developed speech, impaired non-verbal aspects of communication such as eye contact and expressive gestures, circumscribed special interests, repetitive patterns of behaviour and sensory hypersensitivity. Other symptoms of the syndrome can include clumsiness and a stiff awkward gait (Gillberg, 1991).

Despite being intellectually able, pupils with AS in mainstream schools often present particular challenges mainly because their learning style is so distinct from that of others. Because of this, different pedagogic strategies and specialist teaching methods are required to teach these children (Mesibov and Howley, 2003; Jordan, 2005). Asperger (1944) claimed that "exceptional human beings must be given exceptional educational treatment, treatment which takes account of their special difficulties" (p. 1).

However, it is in the area of social interaction and communication that students with AS have most difficulty and it is this aspect of the syndrome which may pose the greatest obstacle to the full inclusion of these children in mainstream schools. Though pupils with AS may wish to form some kind of positive relationship with someone their own age outside of their family, a deficit in the "theory of mind", where the individual has difficulty recognising or appreciating the feelings, beliefs, needs and desires of others, may act as a barrier, making it difficult for relationships to develop (Baron-Cohen, 1997). Because knowledge and understanding of how others think and feel is a major factor in the development of healthy social relationships, the child with AS is already at a distinct disadvantage upon entry into the mainstream school.

METHODOLOGY

The overarching design of this study involved a mainly qualitative approach which is particularly suitable for gathering data concerning social phenomena (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). The qualitative research methods comprised taped semi-structured interviews and document analysis, with quantitative components in the form of a structured observation schedule and a sociometric observation.

Research Population
Karl, the young pupil whose inclusion in the mainstream school was the focus of this study, was diagnosed with AS when he was five years old. He was in third class at the time the research was undertaken and willingly agreed to participate in the study. His mother, Jennifer, and father, Simon, expressed their interest and support for the research and were willing participants. The research site was selected because of its availability and its history of implementing inclusive practices.

Two teachers participated in the study, both of whom had previous experience of teaching pupils with SEN. They included Stephanie, Karl's class teacher and Nora, the resource teacher. Karl's SNA, Ruth, who had worked with Karl for two years, had resigned her post just as the study began but gladly agreed to participate in the research. Marie, Karl's SNA of six weeks also contributed to the study.

Data Collection
Semi-structured taped interviews were conducted with the class teacher and the resource teacher, Karl's parents, both SNAs and Karl himself and formed the principal method of data collection in this case study. Questions were categorised according to the themes of inclusion, curricular access and social interaction and followed a natural progression throughout the interviews (Kvale, 1996). The questions were formulated to accommodate the participants' complimentary roles and to explore their different perspectives on the education of a pupil with AS in a mainstream setting. A sociometric observation was utilised to measure levels of peer interaction. Information regarding curricular access and social interaction for Karl was gathered via structured non-participant observation and review of field notes and other documents.

Observation of Karl's work practices and classroom participation took place in the classroom during three maths lessons, one music lesson and one art lesson and during one physical education (PE) lesson. Karl was also observed in the school yard at lunch-time on ten occasions in order to assess his interaction with the other pupils. Each observation lasted twenty minutes and field notes were written up immediately afterwards.

In order to supplement data gathered by other methods (Bell, 1999), documents belonging to Karl such as his homework journal, copies, worksheets and workbooks as well as his individual educational plan (IEP), reports and timetables, were examined. This examination assisted in gaining insight into the curriculum being followed by Karl, as well as his attitude to work and his success in completing set tasks and activities.

In an effort to examine the social interaction between Karl and his peers, a sociometric observation of the pupils in the class was employed. Pupils were asked to nominate three people beside whom they would like to sit by filling in a simple worksheet (Evans, 1962; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000).

Data Analysis
At each stage of the investigation the data was analysed as it was being presented through annotation and commenting on the tentative themes that were emerging

(Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The interviews were fully transcribed. Single document sheets were prepared for each document collected including the interview transcripts to clarify its contents and assist with data reduction. Working through the data, codes were ascribed to the material. These codes were grouped into mutually exclusive categories representing emergent patterns in the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Inclusion
In questioning the teachers and SNAs on the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in mainstream schools, several factors emerged which highlighted the difficulties associated with implementing the concept of inclusion. Both teachers and both SNAs regarded the severity of the pupil's disability as the primary factor when considering inclusion. This is reflective of research conducted by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and Lawson, Parker and Sikes (2006) in which the nature and severity of the pupil's disability was found to strongly influence teachers' and SNAs' attitudes towards inclusion.

All participants in the study, with the exception of Karl himself, were critical of several factors which they viewed as preventing a successful inclusion programme. Among them were lack of resources in terms of access to external professionals such as psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. Class size, the paucity of specialist teachers and the limited training in SEN teaching which general class teachers receive, were echoed again and again as reasons for the mainstream school's limited ability to meet the needs of all pupils with SEN.

In discussion about children with disabilities parents, teachers and SNAs spoke about the advantages for all students arising from the inclusion of such pupils in mainstream schools. It was felt that pupils with SEN benefited socially from being educated alongside their non-disabled peers by making friends with peers in their locality. The social benefits accruing to the non-disabled pupils in terms of raising awareness and acceptance of disability were also highlighted.

Meeting Karl's Needs: Curricular Access
Curriculum: Aims
In the Irish context, the aims of education are presented in language that is sufficiently general as to make them applicable to all students. The participants in this study were confident that Karl could realise one of the fundamental aims of the Irish education system, to "live a full life and realise his potential as a unique individual through access to an appropriate broad and balanced curriculum" (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2002). Karl himself

admitted that he would like to be a farmer when he grew up and had already grown corn in his garden.

Curriculum: Content
During interview, both parents stated that they were satisfied with the current level of academic provision for Karl and believed that his needs were being met in the mainstream setting. Karl does not study Irish even though he does not have an exemption from Irish and has not been diagnosed with an intellectual disability. While Karl's parents made reference to his circumscribed interests, they believed that Karl was now beginning to explore other subjects.

His teachers and SNAs shared a different opinion however. They pointed out that while Karl's main interest was in reading and his general knowledge was very good, it was extremely difficult to engage him in activities other than reading. They listed mathematics, music and PE as the subjects in which Karl showed very little interest and as a result his engagement in these lessons was limited.

This was corroborated during classroom observation when Karl appeared unwilling or unable to follow the verbal instructions of the music teacher during recorder practice or the class teacher during a maths class. During the PE class, which was a football coaching session in the school field, Karl spent the lesson period lining up and knocking down cones on the sideline. These findings agree with Cumine, Leach and Stevenson's (1998) description of pupils with AS when they point out that " instructions given to the whole class are frequently not noticed by the child with AS who doesn't recognise they apply to him too" (p. 52).

Examination of Karl's workbooks and copies seemed to suggest that he was coping well with accessing areas of the curriculum such as English, history, geography and science.

Curriculum: Pedagogy
There has been much debate as to whether specialist pedagogies are needed to teach pupils with SEN. Norwich and Lewis (2001) found little empirical evidence for special need-specific pedagogies in their review of a common curriculum and argued for "a continua of teaching or pedagogic approaches" (p. 325). Data yielded from the current study does not support this idea and clearly identifies the need for training in specialist methods on the part of teachers if they are to meet the varied and complex needs of pupils on the autistic spectrum.

Both teachers referred to the fact that they do not have specialist training. Stephanie, the class teacher, had completed a six-week module on disabilities as part of her initial teacher training programme but regarded it as insufficient for dealing with pupils with

autism. Nora, the resource teacher, admitted that apart from having attended some lectures on SEN, she had no training in teaching pupils with SEN. The SNAs had completed childcare courses, which included some references to special needs, but the purpose of which seemed to be to merely inform the participants of various disabilities that they might encounter. This finding conflicts with Jordan (2005) who maintains that training for SNAs is essential, "since a mere addition of a support worker may do little to help the person with ASD or his or her teachers" (p. 116).

The teachers interviewed admitted that their lack of specialist training prevented them from implementing aspects of such programmes as the Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) which could be used with this group. Instead, they admitted to relying on methods and strategies that have worked for them with non-disabled pupils.

Curriculum: Context
Both teachers and SNAs highlighted the difficulties in attempting to meet the varied and complex needs of pupils with disabilities in mainstream schools in the context of high pupil-teacher ratios. A common theme throughout the data gathering was the professional anxiety of those entrusted with Karl's education, which arose from their perceived ineffectiveness in meeting Karl's needs due to class size.

There was also agreement among those interviewed regarding the need for parents to be fully informed about the various options available to them when considering a placement for their child. It was felt that lack of information might contribute to the inappropriate placement of some pupils.

Curriculum: Whole-School Approach
The need for a whole-school approach to SEN including time allocated to planning, communication between the partners and a sharing of expertise was seen as a vital component of the inclusive process. Time constraints on teachers in mainstream schools and the autonomous nature of classroom teaching, can often result in these important aspects of curriculum delivery being overlooked. A whole-school collaborative approach, rather than a fragmented effort, is essential for augmenting the curricular advancement of a pupil with AS. The awareness of all staff members of the potential for stress in a pupil with AS as s/he attempts to cope with her/his environment, was viewed by the participants in this study as vital for successful inclusion.

Improving Curricular Access for Karl
Attempts are made to include Karl in all aspects of school life and he is supported in this by his SNA in the classroom and by the resource teacher on a withdrawal

basis. The research suggests however, that this support is not entirely effective in securing access to common learning experiences for Karl. His tendency to "opt out" of those subjects which hold little interest for him is typical of pupils with AS (Mesibov, 1992; Wing, 1992). Both teachers and SNAs admitted their frustration at Karl's apparent indifference to what is taking place in the classroom and the failure of their attempts to keep him on task.

The section of the TEACCH programme referred to as Structured Teaching, incorporates strategies which have proved extremely successful in teaching pupils with autism. Realising that the optimum learning route for these pupils is visual, this approach provides information, structure and predictability for the student, thereby facilitating access to the curriculum. Some structural and visual aspects of this programme could easily be incorporated into Karl's routine. An individual workstation in a quieter area of the classroom would help reduce external stimuli enabling Karl to better focus on the task in hand. Clear labelling of storage areas, designated areas within the classroom for particular activities such as painting, circle time or story time and the use of a visual daily schedule would help foster independence and reduce the need for adult prompting. Examination of Karl's IEP showed that such scaffolding was not being implemented.

Karl's reluctance to participate in PE and formal games, as witnessed during observation, stems in part from his lack of knowledge of the rules of the game. Observation of a game of football revealed that Karl was not aware that the object of the game was to put the ball in the net. Rules of games can be problematic for individuals with AS who, though they may wish to join in, cannot do so due to their overwhelming difficulty in reading and interpreting the cues as the game progresses (Wing, 1992). Rules need to be explicitly taught to these pupils and in some cases rules may need to be modified in order to clarify and facilitate the desired interaction (Mesibov, 1992). Karl's IEP did not include direct teaching of the rules of games or the social interactions one might experience during a game. No provision was made for adaptation or modification of rules to suit Karl. Differentiation of the curriculum was confined to the core subjects of maths and literacy.

Meeting Karl's Needs: Social Skills
Decoding Social Aspects of the Environment
Baron-Cohen (1997) compares the way in which we interpret our social environment to a game of chess in which "social plot and counter plot" must be analysed through constantly changing strategies and moves. While most of us learn to negotiate our way through the social maze intuitively, this is not so for the child with AS. For him, interpreting social nuances and the behaviour and language of others presents enormous difficulties.

Karl's Interaction with his Peers
When asked about friends in school, Karl, without hesitation, named five children in his class as his friends. However, interviews with the teachers and SNAs suggested that Karl did not have any real close friends. They believed that Karl's lack of social and interpersonal skills was seriously hampering his ability to interact with his peers and make friends among his classmates. Observation of Karl, both in the classroom and playground, seemed to corroborate this belief.

In the playground, Karl seldom initiated peer interaction and tended to remain in one corner of the yard, spending his time running up and down, a distance of about six metres, often articulating strange noises. During ten playground observations, Karl was observed initiating interaction with his peers on only one occasion. Karl himself later admitted that he did not play with other children at break-times, because "someone might kick me out of the game". This indicates awareness on Karl's part of a game in progress and perhaps a certain willingness to join in, but a lack of confidence or a lack of understanding of social interplay which may be preventing him from doing so.

This highlights the importance of a social skills curriculum for these students.. According to Mesibov (1992), in discussing the TEACCH approach to teaching social skills, an increase in social awareness in high functioning individuals with autism is not necessarily matched by a corresponding increase in social skills. He advocates the use of social skills group training where participants can learn the skills necessary for "effective social functioning" (p. 149). Skills learned in this group setting are then practised in natural social situations. This model could be adapted quite easily to suit Karl without incurring huge expense in terms of resources. Direct teaching of social skills and improved understanding of social expectations through role play and behavioural rehearsal, as proposed by Mesibov, could be undertaken in the resource room. Skills learned would then be practised in the natural settings of the classroom or playground.

During observation in the classroom, Karl never interacted with or spoke to his peers except during the art lesson when the class were making Valentine cards. Then he chatted to the boy beside him, occasionally asking to borrow a scissors or coloured pencil. He also moved around the room and spoke to two other children. He asked the teacher for card of a particular colour and explained the design of his card to her. Karl's behaviour during this lesson contrasted sharply with his behaviour during the other observed lessons. There may be several reasons for this, not least of which Karl enjoys making Valentine cards. However, the format of this lesson, one which facilitated peer interaction through the sharing of materials, one which was visually based and had a clear and definite end in view with the production of

a Valentine card, may have been more suited to Karl's learning style and therefore proved less frustrating for him.

Non-Disabled Peers' Interaction with Karl
Results of the sociometric test indicated that Karl occupied low sociometric status among his non-disabled peers. While Karl nominated three of his peers when completing the sociometric data gathering sheet, none of his classmates nominated Karl.

Data obtained from interview and observation, did not indicate that Karl's peers were in anyway hostile towards him or deliberately excluded him. Both teachers and SNAs noted the high level of tolerance and acceptance of Karl's presence by the other pupils, but would not refer to it as friendship. Observation in the playground indicated that Karl's non-disabled peers rarely initiated interaction with him.

The nature and frequency of relationships formed between pupils with SEN and their non-disabled peers, depends on such factors as the age, personality and disability of the pupil as well as the familiarity and understanding of the disability by his peers. Relationships are two-way and are equally affected by the characteristics of disabled and non-disabled pupils alike (Hegarty, Pocklington and Lucas, 1981). Peers, through lack of understanding, may have difficulty in knowing how to react, leading to avoidance behaviour and other negative responses. Karl's apparent preference for solitude may be misconstrued by the other children and, therefore, may inadvertently contribute to his further marginalisation.

Interaction with Adults and Others in the School
Teachers and SNAs stated that Karl behaved in a more confident manner when interacting with adults. One SNA attributed this to the fact that Karl was aware of being treated more favourably by adults than by his peers. Cumine et al. (1998) point out that, children with AS appear to find it easier to relate to adults than children their own age, due to the fact that adults compensate for the child's disability and modify their behaviour accordingly. Teachers and SNAs also remarked that Karl often interacted more readily with younger children in the school than with his peers. This tendency to play with younger children is noted by Attwood (1998) who suggests that pupils with AS, when engaged in joint play, have a tendency to dictate or control the activity.

Coping in the Mainstream School
Concern was expressed regarding how well Karl is coping with mainstream school and dilemmas in seeking to provide a fully inclusive programme for him were highlighted. Discussing sensory hypersensitivity, teachers, parents and SNAs noted

Karl's sensitivity to noise both in the classroom and in the playground and described how upsetting this can be for him. Karl himself remarked, when discussing recorder practice in the classroom: "It breaks my ears".

Coping with change throughout the day also presented challenges for Karl. Like most children on the autistic spectrum, Karl preferred the familiarity of the daily routine. However, when unexpected changes in this routine occurred, Karl's anxiety manifested itself in the form of repetitive behaviours. This resistance to change was observed one day when Karl's class were granted an unscheduled rehearsal time for an Open Day performance. Karl was reluctant to leave the classroom and had to visit the bathroom three times before he could be persuaded to join his class in the school hall.

Teachers and SNAs also described how difficult it was to motivate Karl to complete work independently. He required constant prompting to stay on task if he was not to revert to his favourite activity of reading. Both Karl's teachers and parents believed that he was capable of accomplishing much more in terms of work produced, but his tendency to apply himself only to those subjects in which he was interested raised concerns that he was not achieving his full potential.

Improving Social Skills and Developing Friendships
Observation of Karl in the classroom and the playground showed the lack of interaction between him and his peers and his perceived preference for solitude. According to Wing (1992), many individuals with AS long to join in the group and have friends even if they have little concept of what friendship involves.

As mentioned earlier, a social skills programme, which allows these pupils to learn the skills necessary to be socially functional and practice them in natural social situations, is therefore of fundamental importance. The introduction of a buddy system might also afford Karl the opportunity to practise learned skills in various settings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to examine the interpretation and implementation of inclusive practices in a mainstream primary school, in the context of a pupil with AS. The participants outlined several positive aspects of inclusion believing that academic and social benefits accrued to the pupil with SEN from being educated alongside typically developing peers. They referred to an increased awareness of disability by mainstream peers and a greater receptiveness to people with disabilities in the wider community, as directly attributable to inclusive schooling. They also identified

the practical dilemmas associated with the implementation of an inclusive programme for a pupil with AS in a mainstream primary school. Concern was expressed regarding the lack of support in terms of teacher and SNA training. Neither teacher had been afforded the opportunity to avail of in-service training in SEN. The shortage of external professionals such as psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists was regarded as a significant barrier to the successful implementation of an inclusive programme. Insufficient information to parents on the various placements available to pupils with SEN and class size was also mentioned.

It is vital therefore that these concerns be addressed by the various partners in education, primarily in the form of a substantial in-service programme on SEN training for the further professional development of mainstream teachers leading to enhanced inclusive practices. Attention must also be paid to the training of support personnel to enable the vital collaborative classroom partnership to be smoothly executed. Provision, in terms of extra funding is needed for the employment of more psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and other professionals whose input is directly concerned with meeting the needs of pupils with SEN.

The dearth of information on pupils with ASD in mainstream schools in the Irish context necessitates further research and exploration of these pupils' experiences with a view to informing classroom practice and advancing the inclusion argument. The small scale of this research restricts its potential for generalisation to other situations but elements of the study provoke questions about the suitability of mainstream placement for pupils with AS in the absence of adequate support structures.

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