Leadership and Learning in Special Schools for Students with Low Incidence General Learning Disabilities in a Time of Change in Ireland: Principals' Perceptions

This study has captured the passion and the expertise which underpins the professional work of principals of special schools for students with low incidence general learning disabilities (GLD) while offering an opportunity for self-evaluation in their professional lives. Recommendations are offered which could enhance relevant policies and practices for these students.

PAUL J. O'MAHONY is a recently retired teacher who has worked in a variety of schools in Ireland and was principal teacher in a special school for students with low incidence general learning disabilities for twenty nine years. He continues to be actively involved in special education and recently completed an MSEN in St Patrick's College, Dublin.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this small scale study was to explore the perceptions of leadership and learning held at this time by principals of special schools for students with low incidence general learning disabilities (GLD) in Ireland. Scant attention has been paid to the leadership given by these principals, or the needs of students in their schools in the empirical literature and policy developments for more than twenty years. Commentators have described a prevailing unease as to future of these schools (O'Keeffe, 2004; McCarthy and Kenny, 2006). The curent study atttempts to enrich our understanding of the distinctive philosophical patterns which underpin the approaches of these leaders while contributing to the inclusion discourse.

A qualitative approach using semi-structured individual and focus group interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006) elicited the authentic voices of the school principals providing insights into the complex and dynamic challenges involved in their experience of leadership and learning. The contradictions and dilemmas inherent within school leadership are more complex in these schools, due primarily to the exceptional educational and care needs of their most vulnerable students (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2005; Ware, 2005) and the constant intensive interactions with the large and diverse staff complements (Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), 2004).

The seminal official document on leadership published by the Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) service states that "effective leadership is informed and guided by the personal attributes, convictions and values of the individual" (LDS, 2002, p. 2). The LDS

document indicates that the core challenge for school leaders is "to provide optimum learning opportunities for all" and also outlines the wide range of competencies and skills which are essential to carry out this complex role. Similar core leadership values are evident in Hargreaves and Fink (2006) who describe a conceptual framework for sustainable leadership. Research has indicated close connective interdependencies between effective leadership and positive educational outcomes (Burnett, 2005; Fullan, 2006; Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Morgan and Sugrue, 2008).

CONTEXT

The contexts in which schools operate within the Irish education system are many and varied. Factors that contribute to the uniqueness of individual schools include school sector, staff profile, student profile, designated status, location, size, ethos, trusteeship and characteristic spirit (LDS, 2002). Many of the schools which are the focus of this study are under the patronage of and are co-located within health agencies which are responsible for the provision of clinical and administrative services. The Special Education Review Committee Report (SERC) (Ireland, 1993) was the landmark official comprehensive overview of special educational needs (SEN) in Ireland. This report asserts the right of every child to an appropriate education within a continuum of provision that should be as inclusive as possible. Special schools are recognised as part of this continuum. The Education Act (Ireland, 1998) mandated the DES to provide for the education of every child in the state. The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004) and the Disability Act (Ireland, 2005) increased the responsibilities for everyone involved and, in particular, for principals in their various roles as school leaders, and in particular in relation to assessment and education plans for individual pupils.

In 1993 the Supreme Court directed the Department of Education to make educational provision for those children with low incidence GLD who had been considered "in-educable" and excluded from schools (O'Donoghue, 1993). Circular SP ED 02/05 (DES, 2005) outlines the categories of low incidence disabilities which are the least frequent and the most debilitating, and which attract the highest level of educational resourcing. The literature describes a high percentage of these students as having multiple needs in addition to low incidence GLD (Nind and Kellett, 2002; Ware, 2005). The vast majority of the special schools whose principals are at the centre of this study, have significant numbers of students with multiple disabilities enrolled (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2010).

The principals led forty-two special schools in both urban and rural settings. While the DES formally categorised nine of these schools as schools for students with severe and profound GLD and the other thirty-three for those students in the moderate range of GLD (Mahon, 2008), all of the schools also provided educational facilities for students with a multiplicity of SEN. Keating (2008) found that the majority of special school principals were female, held administrative posts and the number of non-teaching staff in their

schools was generally greater than the number of teachers. Over half had been appointed within the past ten years. The participant sample in this study matched these criteria.

Inclusion is the dominant theme in relation to education provision for children with SEN in the acts, policies and practices promulgated by the DES for over twenty years. Within this inclusive environment there is an uncertainty within special schools and their leaders as to their future role, if any, in the Irish educational system (O'Keeffe, 2004; Dempsey, 2005; McCarthy and Kenny, 2006; Keating, 2008). However, these schools have continued to grow in number (Mahon, 2008) and to provide education within the "continuum" advocated in the SERC report (Ireland, 1993).

METHODOLOGY

A review of the literature, relevant policies and consultation with experienced colleagues initiated and guided this study. All of the forty-two special school principals indicated a willingness to participate in the study. The participant sample (n=15) representing approximately thirty five percent of the group of principals (n=42) was selected from the willing participants using a non-probability and purposive approach. Fortuitously, those selected approximately matched the criteria mentioned in the previous section. The qualitative approach included two semi-structured focus group and three individual interviews.

A conceptual framework based on the principles of sustainable leadership "which preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed creates positive benefits for those around us now and in the future" (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006, p.17) was employed to discover and elucidate the perceptions of these principals. These principles underpinned and informed all of the interview questions. The conceptual framework was also useful in identifying and examining factors which sustain effective leadership and learning in their schools.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and the anonymity of the participants was maintained. The findings were thematically analysed and the framework was again used to assist with their categorisation without precluding any other categories. A conscious awareness of bias and preconceived values and beliefs was addressed by strict adherence to ethical codes (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) and the diligent supervision of an experienced supervisor.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The range of category of students attending the special schools led by the participant sample (n=15) is outlined in Table 1. The results highlight a broad range of students with multiple SEN throughout the schools.

Table 1: Range of categories/classes as designated by the DES within the schools of the participant sample of principals

Schools for Children with Moderate GLD		Schools for Children with Severe/Profound GLD	
Moderate GLD only	2	Severe/profound GLD only	3
Moderate GLD + severe/profound GLD	2	Severe/profound GLD + autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)	1
Moderate GLD + severe/profound GLD + ASD	6		
Moderate GLD + severe/profound GLD + ASD + emotional behavioural disorder (EBD)	1		
Total	**11**	**Total**	**4**

The findings indicate both similarities and differences in perceptions and include a wide range of responses within and across a number of key themes. Responses which were consistent within categories are presented as significant findings. For the purpose of this article the findings of the four most relevant themes are outlined - Learning and Caring; Organisational Cohesion; Distributed Leadership and Inclusion.

Learning and Caring
Findings related to the pre-eminence of learning (McGee, 2004), teaching, and benefit for the child were frequent and pervasive within the data. A culture of learning within the schools was described where: "We're there to facilitate teaching and learning in the pupils…and to optimise the benefits that accrue to them…" (Focus Group 1). Fundamental links between learning and caring permeated every discussion under the different themes. This caring attribute was described as underpinning the instructional leader's determination to promote learning because of its intrinsic worth, its benefit to both learner and teacher, and its contribution towards the formation of a professional learning community: "We have to have the child and the learning at the very core... [of everything that we do]" (Focus Group 2).

The core values of all these principals included a personal commitment to the school, a strong affection for, and affiliation with their students: "...how you relate to the child and how you think about the child...if you have the respect for the child...your love for the child is at the heart of everything" (Individual Interview 1). Their personal relationship with each individual student was central to their leadership.

Organisational Cohesion
The principals clearly identified the increasingly complex facets within their responsibilities as leaders of the multi-dimensional learning, and the personal and health care needs of their students. This necessitated the co-operation and co-ordination of a wide range of professional and other staff and resulted in a distinctive challenge for them:

> *You are leading two or three different bodies of people in your school and it's a case of trying to motivate or stimulate on a consistent basis to get their expertise to the forefront so that children will benefit most within the class* (Individual Interview 1).

Onoing conflicts were identified between their commitment to instructional leadership and the incessant demands of the myriad of necessary but unrelenting organisational tasks and responsibilities: "It's a real challenge to keep the focus on learning and education; because of the structures and the various disciplines in the school ..." (Focus Group 2), reflecting the findings of Burnett (2005) and Morgan and Sugrue (2008).

The importance of the principal's skills and experience in supporting and protecting staff and students was a recuring theme:

> *Unless your staff have a feeling that you understand where they are at on a day to day basis...they can come to you because they know you have been there and you are likely to understand* (Individual Interview 1).

This was allied to the necessary mediation of the constant change pressures that impact on schools: "I protect them [staff] from a lot of things because there is an overload situation there at the moment" (Focus Group 1).

None of the principals agreed with the DES directive (NCSE, 2004), that special needs assistants (SNAs) who greatly outnumbered teachers in the schools, should only work in a care and not an educational capacity. There was concensus among all of the participants that there was an urgent need to review the role of the SNA in schools and the vast majority referred to the need for relevant training for SNAs. The lack of revelant training prior to appointment as an SNA together with the delivery of complex educational programmes added to the challenges in these schools, a finding supported by Lawlor and Cregan (2003), Carrig (2004) and O'Neill and Rose (2008).

Real concerns were expressed by the principals in relation to the impact of serious challenging behaviour on themselves, their staff and in particular on vulnerable students. Principals have been identified as often the focal point of stress related behaviours in special schools (INTO, 2004; Kelly, Carey, McCarty and Coyle, 2007). Direct support from the principal and an effective multi-disciplinary team (MDT) were identified in the study as being critical. Participants called for additional training, supports and clear guidelines in relation to the management of the serious challenging behaviours they encounter on a daily basis (Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI), 2002; Proctor, 2003; Prunty, 2006).

Principals whose school buildings were located within health settings expressed concern that their "school" be perceived as a place for education, and not just a place for care: "Curriculum is very important...to be a school...to set us apart from care." (Individual Interview 2). Co-location with mainstream schools emerged as a preferred option.

Distributed Leadership
Principals described multi-dimensional dynamic challenges within the leadership of a large and disparate staff which neither the literature nor official policies appeared to recognise or address:

> *...you are leading two or three different bodies of people within your school and it's a case of trying to motivate or stimulate on a consistent basis to get their expertise put to the forefront so that the children will benefit most within the class* (Focus Group 1).

Professional MDTs were percieved as central to the delivery of an effective educational service within these schools as in Proctor (2003) and Kelly, Carey and McCarthy (2004). These teams could include nurses, psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, medical doctors and social workers who generally were health sector employees. Tensions between the health or clinical orientation of the MDT and the educational imperatives of the teachers were identified : "It's constantly trying to keep everybody on the one track...the ultimate goal...what is the best learning outcome for the child?" (Focus Group 1). While principals were responsible for the students, curriculum implementation and the day to day running of the school, there were no procedures in place whereby members of the MDT team who worked in the schools with the students reported to the principal. The lack of formalised reporting procedures between the MDT members and the principal was identified as a particular challenge. Mutual respect for acknowledged expertise among health and education personnel emerged as a key element underpinning positive relationships.

A further challenge identified in the study was the need to involve parents as partners in the education of their children. None of the schools had a home-school liason teacher and there was: "...a wide catchment area…and special schools which are not readily part of the community..." (Individual Interview 1). However, parents were engaging with the individual educational planning process and principals were using this opportunity to increase understanding and involvement by focusing on learning and talking about "aims and objectives" rather than the "medical needs" of the students.

Inclusion
The vast majority of participants described their own special schools as "inclusive" in that every student was included in all aspects of the school life and curriculum: "We've inclusion in our schools all the time...inclusion means providing education for the child... if you forget the word education you've missed the point" (Focus Group 2). This interpretation of "inclusion" is different to that outlined in the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004) which defines "inclusion" within the context of mainstream school settings. However, the principals believed their schools to be "inclusive" and they also initiated multiple "inclusive" practices, mainly with local primary schools, including dual enrolment projects.

Qualified support was indicated for the inclusion of students who would benefit within mainstream provision but serious concerns were expressed as to the apparent lack of knowledge about and real interest in the essential learning and curricular needs of students with SEN in many mainstream schools:

> *...the guidelines* [NCCA, 2007] *for teachers of students with general learning disabilities never went into mainstream schools really, and nobody looked for it and that worries me ... they are not thinking deeply enough about what they are doing with the children that are integrated* (Individual Interview 1).

The principals talked about their experience of visiting mainstream schools when meeting prospective students and one principal commented: "Every child is entitled to the full curriculum...Yet in the mainstream school...It's absolutely not happening out there" (Focus Group 2).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the current policy environment that promotes inclusion it is encouraging to report that the principals of these special schools perceived themselves to be confident, enthusiastic, optimistic leaders, who facilitate quality learning for both students and staff within their schools. The dominant underlying value that these principals place on the centrality of learning and on curriculum for their students has implications for their placement within a mainstream system. The concern is that a lack of comprehension as to the critical importance of, and the rights of these pupils to an appropriate comprehensive curriculum may be compromised as in Sharkey (2000), McGee (2004) and Lewis and Norwich (2005). Further longitudinal investigation is required as to the quality of teaching and learning for students with low incidence GLD in both mainstream and special schools and would contribute greatly to the discourse on the efficacy of inclusion.

Arising from the findings of this study, the review of literature and based on the authors's long experience working in this special school sector, the following recommendations for policy development and improved provision for children with low incidence GLD are offered:

● A comprehensive in-service training programme with a focus on the pre-eminence of learning should be implemented by the school support services with DES funding for all principals and teachers of students with GLD in all educational settings. Experienced special school leaders should be directly involved with the design, delivery and implementation of this provision

● Arrangements should be put in place by the DES to enable principals, teachers, SNAs and MDT members develop trust and mutual respect and in particular to clarify mutual expectations as to their roles and responsibilities in the provision of an appropriate education for students with low incidence GLD.

- An up-dated clear realistic role description for SNAs needs to be drawn up in consultation with the relevant education partners. Provision for appropriate initial, induction and in-service training must be made for SNAs.

- Home-school liaison teachers should be appointed to these schools to enhance the establishment and maintenance of positive mutually beneficial special school-parental links.

- The location of special schools within the environs of health service providers has contributed to confusion as to their roles and responsibilities. Innovative co-location schemes with local mainstream schools would provide a bridge towards a truly inclusive educational system which could facilitate the sharing of skills, expertise and experience that exists within both the special and mainstream sectors.

Concerns delineated in the literature in relation to the potential closure of special schools as the inclusion agenda gathered force (Male and Male, 2001; O'Keeffe, 2004; Dempsey, 2005; McCarthy and Kenny, 2006), did not appear to significantly impact on these leaders perceptions of the value of the contribution they have made and will continue to make. This confidence appears to be well founded based on the most recent findings and conclusions of Norwich (2008) and the NCSE (2010) which indicate a more flexible interacting continuum of provision where the contribution special schools and their leaders have to make may be recognised and valued.

REFERENCES

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* Vol. 4, pp. 77-101.

Burnett, N. (2005) *Leadership and SEN: Meeting the Challenge in Special and Mainstream Settings*, London: David Fulton.

Carrig, M. (2004) Changing Roles of Special Needs Assistants: Perceptions of a Special School Staff, *REACH Journal of Special Educational Needs in Ireland,* Vol. 17 (2), pp. 119-126.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2007) *Research Methods in Education* (6th ed), London: Routledge.

Dempsey, M. (2005) *Future Roles for Special Schools in the Republic of Ireland* (unpublished Masters thesis), Dublin: University College Dublin.

Department of Education and Science (DES) (2005) *Circular SP ED 02/05 Organisation of Teaching Resources for Pupils who Need additional support in Mainstream Primary Schools,* Dublin: DES.

Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) (2002) *Report of a Survey of Provision for Pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties and Persistent and Challenging Behaviours in Special Schools in Northern Ireland,* Belfast: Author.

Fullan, M. (2006) *Quality Leadership - Quality Learning: Proof Beyond Reasonable Doubt,* Paper prepared for the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), Cork: IPPN.

Hargreaves, A. and Fink, D. (2006) *Sustainable Leadership,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ireland (1993) *Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC),* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Ireland (1998) *Education Act,* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Ireland (2004) *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act* (EPSEN), Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Ireland (2005) *Disability Act,* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) (2004) *Job Evaluation of Principals and Deputy Principals Roles,* Dublin: Deloitte.

Keating, B. (2008) *The Special School Principal in the Republic of Ireland: Their Perceptions of the Nature of Their Role* (unpublished MSEN thesis), Dublin: St. Patrick's College.

Kelly, A., Carey, S. and McCarthy, S. (2004) *A Nationwide Study of Challenging Behaviour in Special Schools in Ireland,* Kildare: National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education.

Kelly, A., Carey, S., McCarthy, S. and Coyle, C. (2007) Challenging Behaviour: Principals' Experience of Stress and Perception of the Effects of Challenging Behaviour on Staff in Special Schools in Ireland, *European Journal of Special Needs Education,* Vol. 22 (2), pp. 166-181.

Lawlor, L. and Cregan, A. (2003) The Evolving Role of the Special Needs Assistant: Towards a New Synergy, *REACH Journal of Special Educational Needs in Ireland,* Vol. 16 (2), pp. 82-93.

Leadership Development for Schools (LDS) (2002) *School Leadership – A Profile,* Ennis: Clare Education Centre.

Lewis, A. and Norwich, B. (2005) *Special Teaching for Special Children: Pedagogies for Inclusion,* New York: Open University Press.

Mahon, D. (2008) *Current Issues in Special Education in Ireland,* Paper Presented at the Leadership Development for Schools Conference, Sligo, December 2008.

Male, T. and Male, D. (2001) Special School Head Teachers Perceptions of Role Readiness, *European Journal of Special Needs Education,* Vol. 16 (2), pp. 149-166.

McCarthy, O. and Kenny, M. (2006) *Special Schools in Transition,* Dublin: Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education.

McGee, P. (2004) Reflection on Irish Special Education over Four Decades, *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland*, Vol. 17 (2), pp. 67-80.

Morgan, M. and Sugrue, C. (2008) The Seven Challenges and Four Rewards of Being a School Principal: Results of a National Survey, *Oideas,* Vol. 53, pp.8-26.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2007) *Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities,* Dublin: NCCA.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2004) *Implementation Report: EPSEN Act 2004,* Dublin: The Stationery Office.

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) (2010) Research Report on the Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland, Trim: NCSE.

Nind, M. and Kellett, M. (2002) Responding to Individuals with Severe Learning Difficulties and Stereotyped Behaviour: Challenges for an Inclusive Era, *European Journal of Special Education,* Vol. 17 (3), pp. 265-282.

Norwich, B. (2008) What Future for Special Schools and Inclusion? Conceptual and Professional Perspectives, *British Journal of Special Education*, Vol. 35 (3), pp.136-143.

O'Donoghue v. the Minister for Education and Others*,* Ireland, *Judgement Delivered by Mr. Justice O'Hanlon on the 27th May, 1993.*

O'Keeffe, P. (2004) The Special School in the Age of Inclusion, *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland,* Vol.18 (1), pp. 3-18.

O'Neill, A and Rose, R. (2008) The Changing Roles of Teaching Assistants in England and Special Needs Assistants in Ireland: A Comparison, *REACH Journal of Special Educational Needs in Ireland,* Vol. 22 (1), pp. 48-59.

Proctor, M. (2003) Challenging Behaviour in Schools for Children with Severe and Profound General Learning Disabilities, *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education*

in Ireland, Vol. 17 (1), pp. 13-22.

Prunty, A. (2006) What affects Teachers' Confidence in Dealing with Challenging Behaviour in Schools? *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland,* Vol. 20 (1), pp. 20-29.

Sharkey, M. (2000) Developing a Policy for Special Needs in Mainstream Primary Schools, *REACH Journal of Special Needs Education in Ireland,* Vol. 14 (1), pp. 12-20.

Spillane, J. and Diamond, J. (eds) (2007) *Distributed Leadership in Practice,* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ware, J. (2005) Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties. In Lewis, A. and Norwich, B. (eds) *Special Teaching for Special Children? Pedagogies for Inclusion,* Berkshire: Open University Press, pp. 67-80.