

Inclusion in Northern Ireland Schools

Section 1. Literature Review

Legislative and Policy Documentation

A study of legislative documents in education from 1944 to 2000 shows how opinion has changed with regard to the educational placement and provision for children with special educational needs. In 1944 it was believed that they could be categorized and educated in 'separate' institutions but today, the legislations and views are that their needs are best served in mainstream education alongside their peers

Some of the most influential legislation and policies include The Warnock Report (1978), The Education Reform Act of 1989 (1989 HMSO), which brought in a National Curriculum for **all** children and gave parents more choice in their child's education, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (HMSO, 1995) and The Children's Order 1996 (HMSO 1996) The Code of Practice (DENI,1996) The Green Paper – Excellence for All (1987). Through these measures the rights of **all** children were strengthened, including the right to mainstream education if at all possible.

What is inclusion?

The legislation might indicate that inclusion is simply the provision of education for all children within the same location, i.e. the same school building. Armstrong et al (2000) in Moran and Abbot (2001, p1) has defined inclusion as "arrangements which increase participation or contact between a disabled pupil or pupils in some form of segregated provision and those in mainstream educational settings". Ainscow (1999) in Dyson & Millward (2000, ch2) has also said there is evidence to show that "Inclusion is often seen as simply involving the movement of pupils from special to mainstream contexts." However, many educationalists have argued that having all children together within a school, or even a class, does not necessarily make it inclusive. Another definition of inclusive from Bailey (1998) in Clark et al (1998) is that it refers to any group of students who may, for whatever reason, have been identified as different and/or may have been discriminated against in terms of access to educational opportunities or to equity of educational treatment and/or outcomes. Supporters of 'full' inclusion, i.e. those who believe all children should receive all of their education with their peers at all times, believe that there should be an end to any segregated 'special' education. (CSIE 2003) They advocate bringing the necessary learning resources

into the classroom and making changes within the organisation of the classroom. Tilstone et al (2000, ch3) says that an inclusive school should be about identifying pupil levels of development etc. and not about seeking out specific difficulties.

Therefore inclusion can mean different things to different people. Dyson & Millward (2000 ch1) believe that it is determined by the history, culture and politics of the particular system in which it is being applied. More recently there has been much argument that the focus of inclusion on disability is too narrow and that it should also include those at a disadvantage through poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion. (Wearmouth 2001, ch1)

What is integration?

The term 'integrated' is defined by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) (http://www.deni.gov.uk/schools/pdfs/transformation_pack.pdf2003) as meaning schools which use all aspects of the school environment to give equal recognition to and promote equal expression of the two major traditions and other cultures in Northern Ireland. Most schools in this region are for pupils of one or other of the two main traditions, i.e. Protestant or Roman Catholic. Integrated schools positively encourage the enrolment of pupils of both traditions and of none to be educated together.

However, outside Northern Ireland the term integration is used to refer to the placement of children with disabilities in education. Armstrong (1998) in Moran & Abbott (2001, p1) defines integration as a way of placing pupils with special educational needs in ordinary schools on a full or part-time basis, or within units within the mainstream. In Switzerland, for example, integration is "...the common schooling and education of handicapped and non-handicapped pupils in ordinary classes of the public school system, with an adequate support for the children with special educational needs."

(<http://pedcurmac13.unifr.ch/Integration/INTEGRE.html>2003)

In summary, it may be that "... a crucial difference between integration and inclusion is that the former implies finding ways of supporting students with special needs in essentially unchanged mainstream schools, while the latter implies a radical restructuring of schools..."(Dyson 2000, ch1)

Models of Special Educational Needs

There are a number of models (http://www.vertou.demon.co.uk/models_paper.htm2003) for thinking about disability but two dominate educational issues. Prior to the 1980s the medical

model in which the child was thought to be sick, ill or 'deficient' in some ways¹ dominated. Dyson & Millward (ch2) point out that the traditional view of education is 'an individual pupil view' where educational difficulties are defined in terms of pupil characteristics. In contrast to this, the view considered to dominate education thinking nowadays, is the social model. This model accepts the effects of a person's disability and believes that it is the environment and society itself which prevents the disabled person from participating fully in society. (<http://www.wheelglife.info/model.htm>)

Features of an inclusive School

Most studies of inclusion conclude that there are identifiable features in schools with an inclusive ethos. These include high expectations of all pupils, a flexible, dynamic response to needs of individuals, partnerships with other schools and professionals, support for the whole child and effective leadership. (<http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/cui-01.html>) Craft (2000, p53) echoes this, explaining how partnerships between teachers can help schools become learning institutions conducive with individual and school development. Dyson and Millward(2000, ch2) point out the necessity for innovation and collaboration between professionals rather than each working in sub-units, although they recognize that this is not always easy. Another issue they identify as important is the culture of the school and whether it is considered a learning environment for all; indications of this would be a culture of continuous professional development and reflective practice.

For many an inclusive school is considered to be one which is open to, and which will provide broadly the same educational opportunities for all pupils, making changes in teaching, curriculum and environment where necessary, to meet the individual needs holistically. Importantly, this will be done in a positive way where teachers and other staff display a willingness to learn, change and innovate and to learn from each other.

¹ Models of disability – an overview DAC www.royalmail.com/dac

Many schools pride themselves on being 'integrated' schools, including the integration of children with different social backgrounds, experiences and disabilities. Many schools have mission statements which talk about valuing all children equally, raising self-esteem and providing for all needs. Are those aims not synonymous with those of an inclusive school?

In deciding whether or not a school is an inclusive school it is important to look at the policies for enrolment and also the composition of the pupils already present. This is reflected in the percentage of children who have been included on the SEN register. In any one school there is expected to be around 20% of children with SEN identified by Warnock as the norm at any time.

Many educationalists would argue that inclusion requires a 'whole-school' (Dyson & Millward 2000, ch1) approach involving changes in curriculum, the provision of in-class support and a change from the role of remedial teacher to SENCO.

Organisation of Special Needs

The Code of Practice made it policy for schools to set up formal recognition, assessment and provision of a special needs department within each school. Previously most schools have made some provision for less able children. Remedial teachers were often employed to help with this 'problem'. They had withdrawn small numbers of pupils from the regular classroom for short periods during the week,. The children selected for this extra teaching were often tested using a Schonell reading test and if they were found to be at least two years behind, were given small group teaching using an 'easier' reading scheme small groups in the 'remedial' classroom.

However, the priority and importance given to this area of learning was minimal; the remedial teachers rarely had received extra training and many claimed to have always felt of lesser status than other teachers. The fact that they were regularly used as cover for absent teachers and a classroom assistant on trips, meant that the role as 'remedial' teacher was devalued. . Self-esteem could be low and as Cullinane (1999, p18) states "...it is difficult for anybody to enhance the self-esteem of another if they do not possess sufficient self-esteem themselves." The knock-on effect of this practice was that the children who should have been receiving extra help were often left in the classroom instead, with the feeling that their needs were of secondary importance. To compound matters, many of their teachers, used to their withdrawal at a particular time had not planned for their inclusion in the lesson. There was often little collaboration between the remedial teacher and the classroom teacher with the result that children had no action plan.

When the Code of Practice in Northern Ireland came into operation, this encouraged many 'remedial' teachers to take early retirement. They were then replaced by a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) who was required to establish official policies and practices. The role of the SENCO was defined and the criteria determined for inclusion on the SEN register. Funding and resources were increased and many schools gained badly needed resources, thus raising the status of the SEN department and the children attending. Their special needs had been officially recognised and their 'specialness' became the subject of much attention. However, the method by which they received their 'special' support may have changed little in many cases. They are often still withdrawn for short periods each week, although it is fair to say that this is now seen as their entitlement rather than an 'extra' provision. In terms of curriculum, the focus is still on reading, generally using a 'special' reading scheme. In the majority of schools educational Plans (EPs) tend to be almost exclusively comprised of reading, spelling and writing targets. However, the pupils are also



benefiting from an increased repertoire of teaching strategies such as role play and interactive lessons, including the use of games and computer.

It might be suggested that withdrawal leaves children feeling excluded or different because s/he gets individual attention. Many SENCOs would argue, with justification, that for many of these children, self-esteem is very low and in class they find it difficult to get the attention they need, therefore, at least for short periods each week they can achieve success and the attention of a caring teacher. Interestingly, the government in the Republic of Ireland has recently published a circular stating that individual withdrawal and one to one tuition is 'contrary to the principle of integration in teaching and learning.' They claim that children of lower ability benefit greatly and that children of average or above average ability are not academically disadvantaged.(DES 2003, p2)

Who has a special need?

Special needs policies usually give some detail as to how pupils are placed on the special needs register and which of those will receive special teaching. Although the government and schools make much of the importance of teachers exercising professional judgment in recognising a child in need of support, the decision to take action appears to be on the basis of reading quotients, standardized scores and IQ test. Schools can, some may say rightly, defend this, by pointing out the 3rd criterion in the Code of Practice which refers to available resources. There has to be a manageable way of allocating resources to the most needy.

Teachers too, support this quantitative approach, as they feel increasingly accountable to local government and that their professionalism is being undervalued. On a recent occasion in one school, when designing new report forms, teachers were consulted and the majority wanted 'Boxes for attitude, effort and results and as little space for writing as possible.'

When interviewing teaching staff it was invariably suggested that pupils with special needs have something less than other pupils; some kind of weakness or deficit that has to be cured

or at least lessened in order to become closer to the 'norm'. The medical model dominates. There would also seem to be a hierarchy of 'special needs'. Sadly some teachers display an attitude of resignation, a feeling of reluctantly accepting children with learning difficulties, "*so long as they sit there and be quiet.*" There is very much less provision for children with emotional or behavioural difficulties (EBD); in fact, they come very far down the list for extra support. It could be argued that in many cases, children who are displaying Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) are generally in need of support in an area of literacy or numeracy and that by tackling this, the EBD is already being catered for. Riddick (1996, p45) would give some credence to this suggesting that most EBD arises from initial reading problems.

What does having children with special needs mean for the teacher in the classroom?

When asked this question, members of staff claim that it increases the workload in terms of preparation and in the time taken to conduct a lesson. Four out of six respondents complained about the need to prepare extra worksheets and different activities for many groups of pupils. Many teachers also express annoyance at the fact that some pupils are seen to be getting too much of the available resources. There is a very definite sense of an unjust system which means "*...that those children who always do their best and do not cause any trouble, are the ones who appear to get the least attention.*"

How inclusive is organisation within the classroom?

Most classes have several pupils who are receiving tuition in a special educational needs unit. Despite being in the same class, however, it is unlikely that their needs are the same, therefore their individual tuition will be provided at different times. Many teachers find this a major disruption as they may be teaching a subject such as science, when the children have to leave

for their individual tuition. This can mean they are missing out on parts of their entitlement to the same educational opportunities. Not only this, but the physical withdrawal of the children can create havoc in the room.

“You have just spent the last 20 minutes explaining the topic and telling the children what to do, when there is a banging door and Johnny comes in shouting and disrupting everyone. I have to waste another five minutes getting the class settled, then finding something to occupy him.”

How inclusive is the curriculum being provided?

Many teachers complain that the perceived increase in numbers of children with special educational needs in their classroom is causing them greater pressure because of the need to follow the NI curriculum. They suggest that the curriculum is already too extensive for the available time, and that providing additional learning material for individual multiple needs, is almost impossible. This spirit of inclusivity is based on the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) which states that children with special needs should not need a different curriculum, but should receive additional teaching within the regular curriculum. This suggests that the responsibility of providing for these children should not be falling on the classroom teacher but should be a shared responsibility between all those working with the pupil: the SENCO, the Classroom Assistant and other professionals.

However, it is important to think beyond the provision of extra resources and to consider the ways in which learning could be improved for **all** children. In examining the way in which many teachers conduct their classes, it is very noticeable that the predominant method of teaching is oral and written board work. Children are expected to rely heavily on the ability to listen and memorise what the teacher is saying, and then to reproduce it in written form with little opportunity for visual or other responses. In order to provide equal opportunities, many teachers believe there is a need to make sure that all children cover the same work.

They also feel under pressure to be able to account for the progress of each individual and strongly feel the need for 'evidence' of what a child can and cannot do, therefore it is difficult for them to justify group work where they cannot be sure who has contributed what.

Although they do recognise the benefits of ICT, they are reluctant to give any child more time on a computer than another.

“How can I get 30 children to write up their stories on the computer? It would take them all year.”

Professional Development and Working Relationships

There is a strong sense that teachers feel they are being judged and as a result many are frightened of change. They find it difficult to reflect on their practice and feel that innovations are changes that are being 'done' to them. The introduction of Staff Development and Performance Review (SDPR) a useful opportunity to embark on a reflective approach has been greeted with suspicion and concern in many schools. Because of this and because of the way in which teachers were reviewed by senior colleagues, most teachers took the safe route and opted for review in an area where they felt relatively strong.

“What can she say about teaching maths? Sure she can't do it herself so anything I do will look good to her.”

Although the Code of Practice makes it clear that classroom teachers are primarily responsible for all the children in their class (CoP 1996), the reality is that teachers pass the responsibility onto the SENCO. Children with Individual EPs must be reviewed termly by all involved professionals. It is intended that classroom teachers help write the EPs and use them in their daily planning and teaching, noting progress towards the targets. Many teachers say that the EPs are not useful in the ordinary classroom; classes are too large, and there is not sufficient time to consult EPs for individual children. It may be that the problem lies with the

EPs and the way in which they are written. Where teachers have delegated the responsibility to the SENCO they have removed their ownership and therefore the relevance to the classroom. There is also bias towards reading and spelling targets. Teaching individual phonics in large classes is very difficult. EPs are therefore biased towards small group teaching or withdrawal.

Teachers are working in a very isolated atmosphere and can be reluctant to share their experiences, concerns and successes with others. As a result problems are often internalised individually. The situation is not helped if there is lack of support from the leadership. Sometimes, because of their integrated or inclusive policies, schools have gained the reputation of accepting almost any child yet, children are admitted without staff consultation and as a result, those with multiple special needs are seen to be ‘dumped’ on staff. Once the child is enrolled there is little recourse for teachers and they can feel that the leadership shows no interest until there is a major crisis. If a teacher complains enough about a child, s/he is often told to talk to the SENCO. Often this means that a teacher will try to cope with the problem until it becomes more of a battle, than an attempt to provide for the child’s needs. This is a prime example of a written policy and an ethos that is applied to staff, but not owned and shared by them.

Section 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, it seems many schools have genuine aspirations of inclusion but the practice is more akin to ‘integration’ as defined in the opening part of this essay.

Although most schools provide for its SEN pupils largely through withdrawal, this is not necessarily disadvantageous (Wearmouth, 1996 ch4) but should be used for many individuals and groups across the ability range. The practice of assessing special needs through testing can be rather narrow and is not really addressing the issue of need from an

individual point of view. It is also open to the criticism that pupils are unlikely to be given additional help until they are considerably far behind their peers and that the policy is actually creating a greater need than might previously have existed.

Co-operation between staff could be improved; too much time is spent writing E.P.s which teachers see to be of little value. Staff partnerships need to consider what form of E.P. would be beneficial manageable for teachers. For many children, particularly those with EBD, the targets need to be more relevant to the classroom.

There is a need for of effective leadership and more support for those who find themselves struggling to cope. Instead of encouraging staff to ask for help, many feel inadequate. The leadership needs to show that having accepted a policy of inclusion, that they are able to show others how to achieve it.

These are some issues where schools could widen their approach to special needs to become more inclusive. However, Dyson himself, writing in the *British Journal of Special Education* (2001, Vol. 28, No 1, p24) feels that the inclusion debate may actually have moved emphasis to inclusion of marginalized groups whose economic and quality of life may be a serious concern for society and this may actually result in 'integration' being the desired model of special needs education in the near future.

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