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## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS IN NORTHERN IRELAND: A MODEL OF BEST PRACTICE**

### **Key Findings**

- ◆ All Principals interviewed in this project believed their whole-school culture to be inclusive. They were committed to accepting the full range of special educational needs (SEN), but this was contingent upon having the right resources available.
- ◆ The main barrier to inclusion was a shortfall in human resources resulting in large classes, delays in specialist support and too few learning support assistants.
- ◆ Most Principals stated that learning support assistants were highly valued in assisting teachers to promote inclusive practices, but a need was identified for more appropriate training in terms of content and the age range for whom the assistants provided support.
- ◆ Principals wanted more funding to deal with the demands of inclusion, with greater flexibility of the SEN budget.

- ◆ Principals in the nursery sector wanted sufficient and appropriate resources to enable early intervention to become a reality.
- ◆ A need was identified to promote inclusive practices at all levels of teacher education, including knowledge of both specific learning difficulties and disabilities, and also appropriate teaching approaches.
- ◆ SENCOs had a full-time, core role that had become more demanding, diverse and managerial in nature. A co-operative approach was used with other staff to develop appropriate teaching strategies and learning support that actively supported inclusion.
- ◆ Most Principals felt that interagency collaboration did not fully support inclusion. Factors impeding such support were poor co-ordination of the different services, long delays in service provision, issues surrounding confidentiality and disclosure, the need for a stronger relationship with Social Services, and the different agendas and values of each organisation.
- ◆ The need was identified for greater and more prompt support from specialists in external agencies, for better interagency collaboration (including Education partners), and for an integrated approach to service provision for the benefit of children and young people.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. The growing international impetus for a philosophy of inclusive schooling has raised the question of whether to have parallel systems of education whereby children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) receive separate forms of education, or to have a unified system that can respond to the needs of all pupils. The inclusive debate must, therefore, be moved forward to consider the characteristics of classroom practice that could address the needs of all, including those identified as having SEN.
2. The purpose of this research study was to provide a model of best practice in the development of inclusive schools throughout Northern Ireland.

## **AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

3. The main aim of the study was to investigate existing practices that increase the motivation, participation and achievement of children and young people of school age with special educational needs in mainstream nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools, and in alternative education provision. Additionally, the views of a range of interagency professionals were sought on aspects of current support for schools within the context of inclusion.

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

### **Culture of inclusion**

4. All Principals described their whole-school culture as inclusive. The key feature of their philosophy of inclusion was catering for individual difference, and most said that they treated all children the same regardless of ability or socio-economic background. Parents and the wider community were closely involved, and pupils and staff alike were made to feel valued. Most Principals in mainstream schools accepted the full range of special needs, but it depended upon their being able to meet individual needs with the available human and physical resources.
5. The main approaches to inclusive curriculum provision were the adaptation of the Northern Ireland curriculum; assessment, review and evaluation of

pupil progress; and planning for individual needs with individual Education Plans (EPs), if necessary. Individual targets were set, the right resources (human and physical) identified, and support was provided by the SENCO and learning support assistants.

6. There was consensus in all 4 school sectors on providing specific support for pupils and using a high level of differentiation but, in so doing, it was strongly emphasised that pupils with particular difficulties were not made to feel segregated.

### **Barriers to inclusion**

7. The main barrier to inclusion identified was a shortfall in human resources that resulted in delays in getting specialist support, classes that were too big and a need for more classroom assistants. Barriers also existed with physical resources (a shortage of specialist equipment or inadequate disabled access in schools), a lack of time and money to manage inclusion, and the attitudes towards SEN of some mainstream teachers and some tutors in the FE sector.
8. The main suggestions as to how government might better facilitate inclusion were largely to do with money, such as more direct funding to schools with greater flexibility of the budget in relation to SEN, and with more immediate and sustained specialist support provided on site at the point of need.

### **Initial Teacher Education, Induction and INSET**

9. Most Principals felt that student teachers were not fully prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms, although they praised their enthusiasm to learn once in post. Induction strongly emphasised the school's inclusive culture and provided support to cater for special educational needs through teacher tutors, the SENCO and other experienced staff. INSET was said to be needed for *all* staff, focusing on specific learning difficulties, disabilities and impairments, and on the use of appropriate teaching and learning strategies.

## **Widening participation and motivation for all pupils**

10. All Principals saw the need for both mainstream and special schools. The advantages of the former were social inclusion, the learning challenges provided by abler peers, attending the same school as friends from the community, and the potential for growth in self-esteem and self-confidence. The benefits of the latter were the specialist knowledge, skills and expertise of staff, specialist facilities (buildings, resources, equipment), and the appropriate focus on learning needs, particularly methods used.
11. ICT could help promote inclusion by facilitating learning and improving the pupils' own feelings about learning. It promoted communication and language skills, fostered self-esteem, motivation and independence, stimulated interest in, and enjoyment of, learning, and increased curriculum access.

## **Learning support assistants**

12. Learning support assistants were highly valued in assisting teachers to promote inclusive practices. Most learning support assistants (nursery, special needs or classroom assistants) held NVQ Level 3 in Child Care, and a few held NVQ Level 2. However, most Principals said that these qualifications were appropriate only to a certain extent or not at all. There was a need for standardisation of the award, and also a need to extend its coverage in terms of content and the age range for which it allowed holders to provide learning support (up to the end of the post-primary phase).

## **Transition issues**

13. The prevailing model of transition was both educational and pastoral with detailed records provided by the feeder school for the receiving school or unit, meetings between staff and parents, consultation with the psychology service, and visits for both child and parents to the new environment. There was no 'formal' feedback following transition, but all Principals agreed that a more structured arrangement would inform practice in relation to pupils with special needs.
14. Once transition had taken place, there was induction for the child or young person, preparation of other pupils with the teacher as a model of accepting

behaviour, modification of the pattern of integration to suit the child, and taking a gradual approach. In some cases, peer mentoring and counselling was provided prior to and after integration.

### **Interagency collaboration and inclusion**

15. Most Principals felt that interagency collaboration was not fully supporting inclusion. Factors said to impede such support were poor co-ordination of the different services, long delays in service provision, issues surrounding confidentiality and disclosure, the need for a stronger relationship with Social Services, and the different agendas and values of each organisation.

### **Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs)**

16. Primary and post-primary SENCOs fulfilled a very wide range of duties, they held a full-time, core position, and most were involved in policy-making for inclusion. Most did not receive clerical support although the role had changed considerably with the greater emphasis on inclusion, and all were under pressure of time to fulfil their duties and cope with a great deal of paperwork.
17. There was close contact between the SENCO, other staff and parents to widen pupil participation, and Education Plans were used to set targets. A co-operative approach was used to develop differentiated teaching strategies and learning support, ensuring teachers could use methods that were transferable across the curriculum. There was also small group work, the effective use of classroom assistants, individual attention and entering post-primary pupils at appropriate examination levels.

### **Strategies used by SENCOs to promote inclusion**

18. Most SENCOs in both sectors did *not* team teach, but the majority withdrew small groups of pupils for extra support with grouping appropriately managed to avoid dependency and thus hinder inclusion. Collaborative learning and peer collaboration were used by most in both sectors. All said strategies were in place to help pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), to help them feel included and to ensure the safety of other pupils.

## Challenges facing SENCOs

19. The SENCOs spoke of the lack of time to fulfil their range of duties, delays in diagnosis and obtaining specialist support, a shortfall of human and physical resources, negative teacher attitudes towards special needs provision, teachers not trained to cater for special needs, a lack of liaison between service providers and teachers, and the demands of making provision for *all* children. There was also a lack of pre-service and in-service training to cope with SEN.
20. As to how government might better facilitate inclusion, almost all SENCOs saw a pressing need for smaller classes (to consider the needs of other pupils too), more classroom assistants, and getting specialist help more quickly.

## Parents and pupils

21. All SENCOs stated that parents were made fully aware of inclusive practices, were kept informed of all provision being made for their child's needs, and were regularly invited to be involved. Equally, all said that pupils were involved in taking ownership of their learning and, as far as cognition allowed, given the chance to express their views on what was, or was not, working for them. This, in turn, informed teaching.

## Interagency Personnel

22. Whilst all senior officers endorsed the concept of inclusion, there was ambivalence as to its current effectiveness, first, because of some mainstream teachers' reluctance to cater for SEN children, particularly those with EBD; second, because teachers did not fully understand inclusion; and, third, because of major challenges for alternative education providers attempting to help young people with very low self-esteem at a very late stage in their formal schooling.
23. Effective, inclusive schooling was thought to lie in stronger leadership at strategic level, greater incremental investment in SEN by Health and Social Services, better assessment of young people's needs, more interagency collaboration and better resourcing for schools.

24. A shift in mindset was required so that the parents of SEN children were offered mainstream education as a first choice, and they also deserved better treatment during statementing, said to be an often laborious and demeaning process. A significant move would be towards the notion of full service schools with their more socially and educationally inclusive concept of schooling, where early intervention worked better.

### **Current support for schools from external agencies**

25. There were highly contrasting views from senior officers on the support provided by external agencies to support inclusion in schools, from excellent to “not working”.
26. Greater support needed to be given to schools by the Education and Library Boards, some highly proactive and others with much more work to do. The recognition at 5-board level that inclusion was the way forward was not matched by the long delays in obtaining support in the classroom, and help was required not only in practical ways, but actively to encourage a positive whole-school mindset towards a culture of inclusion.

### **Alternative and outreach provision**

27. There was a broad continuum of alternative and outreach support, but it was described as one of the biggest challenges for the Department of Education with EBD the worst problem. It was not sufficiently well funded, often came too late in the pupil’s career, and there was no commonality of approach with respect to support across the 5 Education and Library Boards.

### **Improving interagency collaboration**

28. An urgent evaluation of interagency working was called for and the key factors to improve collaborative working were: strategic leadership at the highest level, common aims and shared values, and a much keener appreciation of the part played by fellow agency professionals. Agencies had to ensure that their focus was child-centred and there had to be much greater willingness to share information.
29. At a practical level, key factors were: regular, planned interagency contact and liaison, proper assessment of need and resource allocation, joint

agency training, and time allocated within schools to allow senior management to devise context-specific schemes.

30. At the level of the individual, key factors were: acceptance that a single agency takes the lead role, with one significant adult, either a professional or a parent, designated to the child or young person to avoid overwhelming and further marginalising them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

31. An extensive review of the literature on inclusive education was carried out. The approach to the research was qualitative and 50 face-to-face interviews were conducted with practitioners in a sample of schools, and with a group of professionals from outside agencies involved in the promotion of inclusion:

- ◆ Principals in 28 schools (7 each in the nursery, primary, post-primary and special sectors) selected in consultation with the Department of Education;
- ◆ Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) in 12 schools (6 primary and 6 post-primary);
- ◆ Ten senior officers representing a range of allied health professionals, alternative education providers, the Education and Library Boards, the Education and Training Inspectorate and a voluntary organisation.

## **THE PROJECT**

32. The research project was carried out for the Department of Education by the University of Ulster. The cost of the project was £62,135.

## **FULL REPORT**

33. The full report entitled “The Development of Inclusive Schools in Northern Ireland: A Model of Best Practice” by Professor Anne Moran and Dr Lesley Abbott, University of Ulster, is available on the Department of Education website at  
**[www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg.htm)**

*This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.*

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