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Developing inclusive practice: teacher perceptions of opportunities and constraints in the Republic of Ireland

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There has been a significant policy shift from parallel systems of special and mainstream education in the Republic of Ireland towards provision underpinned by enabling legislation with a presumption for inclusion. The role of teachers in establishing inclusive learning environments is critical and it is generally accepted that inclusive practice relies to a large extent on teacher knowledge, skills, understanding, capacity and attitudes. This exploratory study aimed to gather information on teachers' attitudes about inclusion, and perceived constraints in creating inclusive learning environments. A range of schools from urban, semi-urban, provincial and rural backgrounds were included and data were collected using semi-structured interviews ($n = 24$) including all principals, class teachers and support staff in the participating schools. Teachers recognised the challenge of responding appropriately to diversity within schools and are generally supportive of the principle of inclusion. However, there are clear concerns around their individual capacity and the capacity of their schools to develop inclusive learning environments. A positive school ethos was a significant factor in ensuring inclusive practice. International research indicates that the complex mix of positive teacher beliefs combined with fears and perceived inadequacies is quite common in the evolution of practice towards inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: inclusive education; special education needs; teacher attitudes; school ethos; constraints

Introduction

In the past two decades, educational provision for pupils with special educational needs in the Republic of Ireland has made significant advances. There has been a significant policy shift from parallel systems of special and mainstream education towards provision underpinned by enabling legislation with a presumption for inclusion. This policy shift was due to a number of inter-related developments; international support for establishing more inclusive learning environments for pupils with special educational needs (UNESCO 1994, 2005); enabling legislation that aimed to create a more equitable society and prevent discrimination and marginalisation; parental litigation on behalf of their children to secure appropriate educational provision; significant additional support provided to schools. As a result, it is fair to say that educational provision for children and young people with special educational needs is in a

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transition phase as inclusion policy and practice has yet to become firmly embedded in Irish schools.

This exploratory study aimed to gather information on teachers' attitudes about inclusion, and perceived constraints to inclusive practice. Documenting teacher perceptions will contribute to an understanding of how policy supporting the development of inclusive learning environments is interpreted in practice in schools. The following research questions were developed to explore teacher perception of the concept of inclusion as a school strategy for addressing diversity:

1. What are teacher attitudes to the development of inclusive learning environments within an Irish context?
2. What do teachers perceive as constraints to the establishment of inclusive learning environments within an Irish context?

Policy and provision in the Republic of Ireland

Ireland experienced a rapid development in special educational needs provision dating back to the landmark Special Education Review Committee Report (Government of Ireland 1993) that recommended the allocation of substantially increased resources for the education of children and young people who have special educational needs. Legislative support for these developments was provided through the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland 2004) that mandated the establishment of inclusive learning environments and provided detailed guidance in relation to systemic responsibility for ensuring that assessments were carried out in a timely manner.

Research commentary on policy developments has tended to critique the dominant psycho-medical model underpinning developments in special educational provision (McDonnell 2003). The continual emphasis on addressing individual deficits in children and young people categorised as disabled and/or having special educational needs rather than a sustained critique of existing organisational structures will result in a perpetuation of the psycho-medical model of provision. McDonnell (2003) argues that the failure to address the deep structures of inequality in Ireland will inevitably minimise the impact of enabling legislation for one marginalised group.

The reality of inclusion in Irish schools according to Phádraig (2007) diverges significantly from the vision formulated in recent policy and legislation. The author points out that the withdrawal of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) from class for support and the arrangement of small groups who receive a restricted curriculum is common in Irish schools and does not constitute inclusive practice. It is generally accepted that there has been a significant investment by the state in additional resources to support the education of children and young people with special educational needs. However, despite this investment critical gaps remain. Kinsella and Senior (2008) commented that developing inclusive provision required increased expertise within schools and the creation of an integrated service model at school level involving a high degree of collaboration between education and health professionals. Participants in Travers et al.'s (2010) study reported that there were serious obstacles in developing inclusive provision for children and young people with special educational needs, those from economically disadvantaged communities and those whose first language is not

English. Assessment issues, in particular the lack of access to appropriate and timely assessments, appeared to cause most problems as educational resources are dependent on the outcome of the assessment process. In addition, inappropriate pupil behaviour and high levels of pupil absenteeism appeared equally intractable despite strenuous efforts by the schools. Drudy and Kinsella (2009) argue that inclusion has been too narrowly conceptualised as only involving children and young people with special educational needs and the concept of inclusion needs to focus on developing school capacity to respond to diversity including children and young people from ethnic minorities and from disadvantaged communities. Rose et al. (2010) in their review of Irish research concluded that the experiences of pupils with special educational needs appear to be: 'characterised by a lack of understanding of how best to ensure that they gain appropriate access to teaching and learning in schools' (366).

Teacher attitudes to inclusion

Establishing inclusive learning environments is guided by the core principle that all children and young people should be educated in their local school whatever type of special educational need they experience (Florian, Young, and Rouse 2010). More recently there has been an increased recognition that inclusive education also refers to the wider issue of social diversity and the need to be aware of how ethnicity, language and inter-generational poverty can contribute to the marginalisation of particular children and young people (Drudy and Kinsella 2009; Florian, Young, and Rouse 2010; Forlin 2010a; Slee 2011). Slee (2011), for example, emphasises that:

Inclusive school cultures require fundamental changes in educational thinking about children, curriculum, pedagogy and school organisation. (110)

The role of teachers in establishing inclusive learning environments is critical (Forlin 2010b; Leung and Mak 2010). Inclusive practice relies to a large extent on teacher knowledge, skills, understanding, capacity and attitudes (Hornby 2010; Horne and Timmons 2009). Research studies have indicated that while teachers may favour an inclusive model of education there is substantial evidence that teachers can experience difficulties in the implementation of inclusive practice. Teachers' lack of confidence relating to personal instruction, skills and availability of resources represented significant challenges in developing inclusive learning environments (Croll and Moses 2000; Forlin 2010a). Teachers appeared to experience significant difficulties with the inclusion of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the classroom (Cooper and Jacobs 2011). As a result, students with special educational needs were often perceived by classroom teachers as 'someone else's problem' more particularly the responsibility of the SEN dedicated teacher (Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000; Conway 2010). Skidmore (2004) attributes this attitude to the notion of 'expertism', which relates the students' 'needs' to notions of deficit that require a 'specialist' pedagogy which is not available to mainstream class teachers. This theoretical stance promotes the idea that mainstream schools are unable to respond to the diverse needs of students and therefore compromises efforts to create inclusive schools.

Challenges to teachers in developing inclusive practice have also been attributed to teachers' inadequate professional development and the ability to deal with a variety of special educational needs (Hodkinson 2005; Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman 2008).

Many newly qualified teachers entering the professional arena perceive themselves as ill-equipped to teach these pupils (Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000; Garner 1996). This experience is not unique to newly qualified teachers, experienced teachers have voiced similar concerns (Florian and Rouse 2010; Rose 2001). In the Avramidis and Norwich's (2002) study, teachers' attitudes appeared to be influenced more by the severity of children's disabling condition and less by teacher-related variables. Leung and Mak (2010), in their study of primary teachers in Hong Kong, report similar findings with teachers commenting that the professional training available was inadequate and they urgently required training in classroom management. Teachers regularly report that they require additional skills to implement inclusive practice (Winter 2006). Teachers in Blecker and Boakes's (2010) study were concerned at the lack of planning time and support for effective collaboration. In addition, restricted access to continued professional development may perpetuate negative attitudes towards students with special educational needs and encourage scepticism about the viability of inclusive education models (Avramidis and Norwich 2002; Hollins and Guzman 2005).

The availability of physical and human support was consistently found to be associated with positive attitudes to inclusion (Ainscow et al. 2012; O'Donoghue and Chalmers 2000). A positive school ethos and the positive attitudes of staff within a school are factors that usually contribute significantly to the success of inclusion (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Loreman 2000; Shevlin and Flynn 2011). Florian, Young, and Rouse (2010) argue that the challenge of inclusion for practitioners: '... is to respect and respond to human differences in ways that include rather than exclude learners in what is ordinarily available' (719). This, the authors, believe will involve focusing on ensuring that what is ordinarily available is of high quality and enabling teachers to develop their current knowledge of special educational needs and the appropriate pedagogic strategies to support the learning of all students.

Methodology

This research was intended to provide an initial exploration of teacher attitudes to inclusion within the context of government policy and legislation supporting the development of inclusive learning environments. The research team decided to employ opportunistic sampling given the small-scale nature of the study and the resulting difficulties ensuring adequate representation of school types, gender mix and socio-economic status. Within these limitations, the research team included a range of schools from urban, semi-urban, provincial and rural backgrounds. The research team had personal contacts in a number of schools which were then whittled down to the seven selected on the basis of the criteria mentioned above. The criteria did not include any consideration of whether these schools were recognised within the education community as leaders in developing inclusive education environments. Seven schools (4 primary/3 secondary) agreed to participate. Within the primary sector the following types of schools were represented: one urban disadvantaged status; one semi-urban; one rural and one provincial town. The secondary cohort included one urban school, one semi-urban school and one from a provincial town. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews ($n = 24$) including all principals in the participating schools ($n = 7$), and a number of class teachers ($n = 9$) and support staff ($n = 8$). The researchers devised a schema of questions based on the literature review, for use as a checklist to ensure that key areas were covered in the interview. The following

Table 1. Schools, levels, numbers on roll.

Level	Code	No. of children enrolled
Primary level	PS1 (rural)	92
	PS2 (provincial)	158
	PS3 (semi-urban)	466
	PS4 (urban) (disadvantaged)	582
Second level	Sec1 (urban)	1020
	Sec2 (provincial)	953
	Sec3 (semi-urban)	1005

areas were explored in the semi-structured interview: teacher understanding of inclusion; whole-school policies and approaches in relation to inclusion; examining current inclusive and exclusive practice within school; teacher belief systems around inclusion; existing teacher skills and confidence; established support systems within the school; pupil curricular access and learning outcomes.

Table 1 provides details of the enrolment numbers in each type of school: primary and secondary with pupil numbers ranging from 92 up to 1020.

Resource allocation in the Republic of Ireland is based on an assessment according to disability and/or special educational needs category. There is evidence (see Table 2) that particular types of special educational needs are well represented in the survey schools with a high preponderance of students with dyslexia particularly at secondary level. There appears to be some indication that students with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder) are beginning to appear in some mainstream schools (Travers et al. 2010).

The theoretical framework developed by Strauss and Corbin (1994) informed the data analysis. Each transcription of the semi-structured interviews was subjected to three levels of coding managed by two members of the research team. This was conducted by each researcher independently, the two then meeting to corroborate coding. Where there were anomalies these were initially discussed by the two researchers and where necessary consultation made with a third team member. As a result of this

Table 2. Special educational need.

Category	PS1	PS2	PS3	PS4	Sec1	Sec2	Sec 3
Physical disability	1				3	2	6
Hearing impairment	1				1	3	1
Visual impairment			1			1	1
Emotional/behavioural	1	1	2	2	2	9	1
Mild general learning disabilities	3	3	1	2	15	7	19
ASD		4		2	1	2	3
Dyslexia		6	12	8	11	36	28
Specific speech and language		3	2		2	7	2
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder		2	1	2	2	6	6
Dyspraxia			3			6	
Multiple disabilities					1		
Down syndrome		1					
Unspecified							1

process major themes and sub-themes were identified that will be explored below. Open coding of the data was employed to interpret rather than summarise each item and develop the appropriate categories using axial coding to provide a connection between the categories and produce the study themes and sub-themes.

Teachers who participated in this research are generally identified by their professional role (principal; support teacher; class/subject teacher). Following each extract, a code (letter and numbers) is given: a letter indicates the interview grouping (primary/post-primary/principal, support teacher and class/ subject teacher). The number indicates the transcript page. The following coding was used: PPr = Primary Principal; PST = Primary Support Teacher; PCT = Primary Class Teacher; PPPr = Post-Primary principal; PPST = Post-Primary Support Teacher; PPSuT = Post-Primary Subject Teacher.

Results and discussion

Two major themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews and comprised perceptions about inclusion and constraints to inclusion. Thematic analysis of 24 semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers and resource staff highlighted teacher perceptions as being a critical issue in determining levels of educational inclusion. A number of sub-themes relating to perceptions emerged from the thematic analysis process including meaning of inclusion; enabling inclusion; school ethos and concerns about inclusion. Perceived constraints on inclusive practice included inadequacies in training, time, funding for resources, external supports, increased behavioural challenges, teacher resistance and falling standards in literacy and numeracy. Despite the variation in the roles of the participants and their location in primary and post-primary schools, there was remarkably little variation in the general tenor of the responses though some variation in emphasis was apparent that will be explored later.

Perceptions of inclusive education

Perceptions about inclusive education among participants tended to group around the following sub-themes: how inclusion was defined (meaning); facilitating factors (enabling); school ethos and philosophy; concerns about inclusion.

Meaning of inclusion

There was general understanding among participants that inclusion is 'a continuous, holistic process' (PPPr, 34) that 'allows all pupils, irrespective of difference, to follow a comprehensive curriculum in school' (PST, 401). Inclusion was also conceptualised in terms of schools successfully making a difference to pupils' academic, social and personal experience. Others viewed inclusion as a reflection of the fit between pupil needs and learning style and teacher responsiveness and teaching style. For the majority of participants inclusion was defined in terms of a psycho-medical model, with a focus on assessed disability and children and young people with special educational needs. To a certain extent this perception reflects the current resource allocation system in operation that uses a 14 category of SEN model to allocate extra support to schools and children with SEN (McDonnell 2003; Shevlin, Kenny, and Loxley 2008). Inclusion was frequently conceptualised in terms of children with special needs being 'fitted into' existing provision, a perception reported, in particular when inclusion policy and

practice are not fully established features of educational provision (Skidmore 2004). It is equally noteworthy in this study that the majority of respondents, whatever their role within schools, perceive inclusion as a challenge that promotes action and learning, rather than as a threat. Positive attitudes towards inclusion can exist in parallel with limited conceptions of actual inclusive practice in schools (Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000; Loreman 2000; Skidmore 2004).

Enabling inclusion

Participants who reported a proactive approach to inclusion, viewing it as a challenge and a focus for further professional development, exhibited greater confidence and belief in their skills, a critical factor in developing inclusive learning environments (Florian, Young, and Rouse 2010; O'Donoghue and Chalmers 2000). They tended to report more positive experiences and whilst recognising the need for more formalised training, demonstrated a willingness to learn for themselves, often through trial and error. They also expressed the view that the process of actively including pupils with more significant special educational needs has enabled them to up-skill themselves and accrue better resources and teaching methods in their schools, a finding also evident in related research (Ainscow et al. 2012; Avramidis and Norwich 2002). Personal skills and qualities were critical and these included diplomacy, patience, openness and flexibility. Improved practical skills in areas such as conflict resolution; differentiation; application of varied teaching methodologies; matching learning styles with teaching styles; active observation; questioning techniques and verbal and non-verbal behaviour were also cited as a positive outcome:

And there is so much that we have to learn and be ready to accept and as far as teachers, to adapt and be very flexible about how we approach children, regardless of what age or what ability they have. (PPr, 266)

Reflection on practice and collaborative problem solving has been recognised as central to the development of inclusive learning environments (Florian, Young, and Rouse 2010) and there was evidence in this study of collaborative approaches being employed: 'Both the teachers and the SNAs (Special Needs Assistants) are very reflective, they're very proactive, and they will come to you, and we sit down and discuss it' (PPr, 276).

Understanding the connection between unmet learning needs and challenging behaviour was also cited as critical by a number of participants and articulated as follows by a primary class teacher:

In this school I had a child in who was behaving very, very badly but we've gotten to the bottom of it now . . . he has dyslexia and he felt he was stupid, and you know things like that happen. Once you realise that, you can work on it. (PCT, 376)

Participants also conceptualised inclusion in terms of observable social, academic and behavioural outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs. This is particularly noteworthy as according to Rose et al. (2010) there has been comparatively little emphasis on social, academic and behavioural outcomes in Irish research. In the absence of external mitigating factors in the children's lives, teachers tend to regard unhappy, unsettled behaviour or declining performance, as a signal that something is not working in the system. In many schools the success of inclusion

is measured not only in terms of pupils' sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, but also for its potential to 'break cycles of failure'. As a subject teacher (Geography) in a post-primary school commented:

Exam success is a good measure of the success of inclusion, in that it allows pupils to achieve to their full potential whether that be in four subjects at foundation level (lowest level at Junior Cycle) or eleven subjects at higher level. (PPSubT, 485)

The value of inclusion was often conceptualised in terms of positive pupil outcomes:

Things are happening, you're doing things, not for the sake of it or because it looks good in your plans or because the inspector will think it looks good, it's because you can see the children from year to year are benefiting from it. (PCT, 387)

School ethos

Effective leadership in schools is reported to be associated with proactive leadership style rather than reactive management style (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Shevlin and Flynn 2011). School leaders tended to view inclusion as a whole-school process that extended to how the school was organised and the mutual respect that was paramount as expressed by a post-primary subject teacher:

Well I think there's great communication between the staff and management, I think it is very inclusive, there's a great emphasis on academic but also on extra-curricular and there's a huge weight of extra-curricular activities that take place within the school and people are very positive about the school. (PPSubT, 478)

One primary school principal emphasised the centrality of pupil belonging as a critical component of inclusion: 'It's about the ethos of the school and whether or not the child feels like they belong in the learning environment, as well as in the social environment of the school' (PPr, 125). Many schools were in the process of drafting policies of special educational needs taking account of the increased pupil diversity within their schools: '... when I look in an inclusive school I am thinking of our international pupils and our traveller pupils so I'm thinking of encompassing the whole lot – that you have open access for all pupils coming into your school' (PPr, 445).

Concerns

The majority of participants believed that the diversity and prevalence of special educational needs has increased in recent years and this was a particular concern for post-primary subject teachers as illustrated below: 'I suppose really when we're talking about special needs, the range is much bigger now than what we would have been used to in the past ... and I think that's a challenge for teachers ...' (PPSubT, 480).

Doubts about the appropriateness of inclusion for some children appear to depend on the type and severity of disability and/or special educational need with moderate general learning disability, significantly challenging behaviour and severe autistic spectrum disorders reported as major concerns in mainstream schools. The majority of principals discussed fears about including children with significant needs they had not experienced before as illustrated in the following extract:

I suppose we haven't had any autistic children but I suppose I would have had worries about anxieties if we had an application for a severely autistic child or severe behavioural difficulties, I would look on what we have had as very mild . . . (PPr, 447)

Another principal expressed the concern that one child had not received an appropriate education:

And I would think of that pupil who had a moderate learning difficulty . . . even with the support of a special needs assistant, I suppose she was integrated as socially as she could be, yet I think that the guilt here would be more with the class teacher, feeling that she wasn't able to do enough for her. (PPr, 448)

The inclusion of pupils with significant social, emotional and behavioural difficulties was noted as a particular challenge by the majority of participants. Participants questioned whether they were acting in the best interests of a significantly 'socially, emotionally or behaviourally disturbed' child by expecting them to adapt to mainstream rules, routines and regulations. Equally, the impact of including pupils with significant emotional or behavioural disturbances on the emotional, social and educational development of other pupils was reported to be a concern. These types of concerns about including children with challenging behaviour have been reported in Cooper and Jacobs's (2011) extensive review of the literature. The inclusion of the most challenging, disaffected pupils is reported to be extremely costly in terms of time, resources, teacher stress, use of external referral sources and supports, often at a cost to other pupils. A primary school support teacher captures the genuine struggle experienced by some class teachers:

Well they would say things like 'I don't know what to do with her – I have no idea. I've tried so many ways of getting her to sit on a chair or not throw stuff . . . I'm actually at a loss here and I don't know what to do next . . . I'm at my wit's end'. (PST, 429)

Perceived constraints on inclusive practice

All participants identified inadequacies in training, time, funding for resources, external supports, increased behavioural challenges, teacher resistance and falling standards in literacy and numeracy as limiting factors in creating inclusive learning environments. It is difficult to evaluate the relative contribution of each these factors as they appear to be largely interactive.

Training

Inadequacies in training at undergraduate, postgraduate and on the job training were the most universally cited constraints to creating inclusive learning environments. The need for focused professional development is a recurring theme in the international literature on inclusion (Avramidis and Norwich 2002; Forlin 2010b). The transformed situation in schools with the rapidly increasing numbers of children presenting with special educational needs was cited by one support teacher in a primary school as a compelling reason for in-depth training:

. . . it does present different types of problems in terms of just the flexibility, the learning support strategies, the team teaching and all the different approaches we normally take to deal with this, it's so different from even ten years ago isn't it? (PST, 420)

A primary school class teacher maintained that all mainstream teachers would gain enhanced understanding and awareness from additional training:

... when you have 30 other children I suppose and there's a child acting up on you and I think the old mainstream way is oh my God, they're acting up, they're being bold, whereas really it's ok, I'm not able to communicate so I'm going to use the behavior to tell you what I want and a lot of the teachers in mainstream wouldn't have much special needs training so I don't think the understanding is hugely there. (PCT, 182)

Time

Time constraints were also cited by the majority of interviewees as a barrier to effective inclusive practice, specifically time: for lesson planning; for administration, paperwork and correcting homework; for developing policy; for staff liaison and collaboration, including collaborative planning time; for screening and identification of pupils with special educational needs; for liaison with parents and with other professionals; to develop individual plans and programmes; to meet the demands of the revised curriculum at primary level; and to respond to demands of teaching subjects at examination level at secondary level. Participants in the Horne and Timmons (2009) study in Canada concurred with this view as the vast majority of respondents cited time as a major constraint in developing inclusive learning environments. The view that it takes time to get to know pupils as individuals, to understand their individual needs and put appropriate interventions into practice is widely stated. Inadequate, unstructured opportunities for liaison between class teachers, support staff, parents and other professionals are a major constraint. At the classroom level, there is limited time for differentiation by input and output, developing individual education plans and doing other administrative work, whilst struggling to deliver the curriculum. On the whole-school level, there is limited dedicated time for developing inclusive practice though training days, staff meetings and in-service.

Support

On the whole, participants believe that greater access to professional support such as the National Educational Psychological Service for assessment and support/advice on intervention in terms of the number of days that the psychologist is available to the school, would assist them in creating more inclusive learning environments in the longer term. Whilst participants note that they are benefiting from the additional range of services their assigned psychologist can provide, they feel that assessment is still the key to obtaining additional resources and special needs assistant support for students with special educational needs. One principal of a socio-economically disadvantaged school reported inequalities in accessing assessments as in more advantaged areas parents could afford to pay for private assessments and access resources for their children in a timely manner. There are concerns about lengthy referral waiting lists to child guidance clinics, poor liaison and communication between the clinics and school special needs teams in terms of diagnosis and intervention which: 'has implications for the inclusion of some of our most vulnerable children and adolescents' (PPPr, 402). Establishing effective inter-agency collaborative practice has already been noted as a significant difficulty for special educational provision in Ireland (Kinsella and Senior 2008).

Parental involvement and support is widely reported to be an important facilitating/limiting factor in effective inclusive practice, a factor also reported within an Irish context by Shevlin, Kenny, and Loxley (2008) and internationally (Hornby 2010). Social problems such as disadvantage, divorce, abuse, illiteracy, addictions, criminality, 'cycles of failure', poverty, homelessness and the breakdown of the family are frequently implicated as constraints to parental involvement (Drudy and Kinsella 2009). Lack of parental support can lessen the impact of school interventions to support learning:

But if the parents are these hard to get parents, or hard to get at parents, then the children aren't going to be encouraged, they are not going to get their homework checked. ... its like the triangle effect, the pupil, the teacher and the home, they need to be working together, they need to be working in tandem and that isn't always the case. (PPr, 317)

Staff resistance

Teacher attitudes about autonomy, territory and self-protection are an issue in schools to varying extents. Participants report that some teachers are resistant to having to differentiate for pupils judged to be 'weaker'. There is a feeling among some teachers that identification, screening and intervening with pupils with special educational needs is the sole responsibility of the special needs team. This attitude tends to be attributed to older, more experienced teachers. Some teachers appeared reluctant to ask for additional support as reported by a support teacher in a primary school:

I think in the past it's been really very difficult because there's been a resistance to allowing other people in – classroom teachers are expected to be able to manage their world and if they can't manage their world, it is a management problem on the part of the class teacher ... teachers try very hard to manage without calling for help. (PST, 430)

Changing teacher perceptions can be a difficult process as recognised by the following speaker:

I think it's very hard to break old ways or to change traditions or to change perceptions ... it's a very slow process – because all the training can go on but unless people don't feel threatened ... there is a sense of vulnerability around the profession. (PST, 430)

One primary school principal based in a rural area reports that there can be some difficulty with teacher expectations and inclusive practice: '... you've got to reach the child where they are at, not where you think they should be at' (PPr, 268). A primary school support teacher identifies how expectations and understandings can be a barrier to inclusion: '... unrealistic expectations or even genuine lack of understanding or acceptance that children learn in different ways, to different extents and at different speeds, with varying levels of motivation and mastery' (PST, 324)

Fear appears to be a major component of teacher resistance to inclusion. Teachers have reported fear of the unknown, fear of criticism and ultimately fear of failure (Croll and Moses 2000; Hodkinson 2005). There is evidence in this study that these crucial factors also played a role in staff reluctance to engage with inclusive practice. The importance of instilling the notion that there is more than one way of doing things is reported to often be more challenging for more experienced staff. Perhaps the most important factor in changing teacher attitudes is success with inclusion itself (Ainscow et al. 2012; Avramidis and Norwich 2002).

Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties

Challenging behaviour is cited as a major reason why some students continue to be segregated in school. Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are reported to be on the increase in terms of severity, complexity and prevalence and teachers report that the support systems are inadequate or too slow to respond as expressed by a primary school principal in a small town: ‘... behavioural difficulties ... gives the class teacher huge challenges and it is that you are so long waiting for the resources to be put in place – the only thing really that excludes students from anything in our school is behaviour’ (PPr, 447).

Major concern is expressed at the extent to which significantly challenging behaviour infringes upon the rights of all pupils and teachers. There is a strong sense of frustration about managing very challenging behaviour on a day-to-day basis and its negative effects on the learning environment. Children will not learn well when discipline is undermined, teachers are despondent and the atmosphere is unpredictable and threatening. Some believe that all children want their behaviour to be managed, irrespective of their difficulty. Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties present a challenge which requires creative solutions and a willingness to look at international best practice (Conway 2010; Cooper and Jacobs 2011). In schools who manage challenging behaviour skilfully, an inclusive learning environment focusing on prevention rather than trouble shooting is likely to already be in place. The interviews unequivocally highlight the importance of multi-agency responses to children’s social, emotional and behavioural challenges and close collaboration with parents as well as the wider community.

Falling standards in literacy and numeracy

A number of participants note that apparent falling standards in basic literacy and mathematics is making the job of inclusion more challenging at both primary and secondary level and a subject teacher in a large post-primary school in the commented as follows:

I’ve seen basic levels of English and writing disimprove in the 10 or 11 years I’ve been here now. There are plenty of kids coming in now in the first year not being able to write a sentence ... the way the system is designed at secondary school level – there is a lot of writing to be done in these subjects, assessment is all writing based’. (PPSubT, 485)

It is clear from the interviews that teachers are facing the challenge of working with pupils who have very low levels of attainment in basic literacy and numeracy. This is particularly problematic at post-primary level. In addition, the range of attainment in basic literacy and numeracy levels within the classroom setting presents major challenges for mixed ability teaching and differentiation.

Concluding comments

The results and discussion section offers some valuable insights into teacher perceptions on developing inclusive learning environments. There is clear evidence that teachers recognise the challenge of responding appropriately to diversity within schools and are generally positive towards and supportive of the principle of inclusion.

However, there are clear concerns around their individual capacity and the capacity of their schools to develop inclusive learning environments. Teachers report that some of the basic requirements for inclusive practice are missing. In particular, the urgent

need for initial and ongoing professional development in the area of special educational needs was emphasised. In addition, particular groups of children and young people were believed to be especially difficult to include within a mainstream environment and teachers felt quite vulnerable in dealing with these children. Teachers believed that the lack of time for collaboration was a major constraint and this was exacerbated by difficulties in accessing external support services. At post-primary level there are tensions for teachers in achieving a balance between supporting individual learning needs and ensuring examination success.

Parental support was considered of paramount importance and schools made strenuous efforts to involve parents in addressing the learning needs of the children and young people. There was evidence that a positive school ethos was a significant factor in ensuring inclusive practice. In addition, a number of teachers viewed the challenge of establishing inclusive learning environments as an opportunity to develop their professional learning and expertise.

Conclusion

This exploratory study has attempted to document teacher attitudes to inclusion and teacher perceptions of current constraints to establishing inclusive learning environments. Given the inherent limitations in the study sample some very initial and tentative findings are offered as a basis for a more in-depth exploration of this critical issue within Irish schools. There is some evidence that teachers accept the principle of inclusion though there are some reservations about inclusion in practice. Further research could investigate how support for the principle of inclusion is implemented in practice and in particular how opportunities for professional learning within schools in the area of inclusive education can be fostered. In addition, the school focused constraints to inclusive practice identified in this study could be further examined in order to develop appropriate strategies to support the establishment of inclusive learning environments.

International experience in inclusive practice has indicated that the complex mix of positive teacher beliefs combined with fears and perceived inadequacies revealed in this study is quite common in the evolution of practice towards inclusive learning environments. Irish policy and provision in relation to inclusion is in a transitional phase as legislation mandating the development of inclusive learning environments has yet to be fully embedded in schools. Ensuring that inclusive practice becomes the norm in Irish schools will involve teachers reappraising their attitudes and practices and being offered opportunities to develop their professional knowledge and skill base. This is the challenge facing policy-makers and educators in the Republic of Ireland.

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