

**Creating inclusive learning  
environments in Irish schools:  
Teacher perspectives**

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# Executive Summary

## 1.1. *Research aims*

The study aimed to gather information on teachers' perceptions about inclusion, current practice in creating inclusive learning environments and current constraints to inclusive practice. It was anticipated that documenting teacher perceptions would contribute to an understanding of ways in which policy supporting the development of inclusive learning environments could be translated into practice in schools. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are teacher attitudes towards and perceptions of the challenge of developing inclusive learning environments as mandated by recent legislation on the island of Ireland?
2. What school practices help to improve the participation and learning of marginalised students?
3. What factors limit the capacity of schools to develop inclusive learning environments?

## 1.2. *Methodology*

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted and semi-structured interviews were used to generate data. Interviewees included principals, support staff and class teachers in primary and secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. One special school was also involved. Schools varied by socio-economic status and urban/rural setting. The data was analysed thematically and discussed in the context of the current literature on inclusion.

## 1.3. *Literature review*

Research on inclusion and inclusive practice is extensive so it was decided to focus on key generic issues that have widespread applicability and that have particular relevance to Ireland. These issues included: the meaning of inclusion; inclusion policy and legislation; teacher attitudes, perceptions and school ethos; practice issues including organisation of class groupings and professional expertise; parental involvement; the role of support within schools; and obstacles to inclusion.

### 1.3.1. **International Inclusion Policy and Legislation**

International developments in policy, research and practice have established the right of students with disabilities to be educated in mainstream schools. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) proclaimed that schools should accommodate all children including those with a disability. More recently, the Dakar Statement (UNESCO, 2000), reflecting a World Education Forum, restated an international commitment to education for all children in inclusive, educational environments. The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN 2006) is also important, although it has still not been ratified in some countries. Ratifying this Convention imposes an obligation on signatory states to submit regular reports on

progress and implementation. According to Mittler (2008), inclusive education constitutes one of the outstanding contentious issues in this convention.

### **1.3.2. Defining Inclusion**

There are differing views of the definition of inclusion. On the one hand, inclusion is viewed as an extension of special education. Other beliefs suggest that inclusion is wrought from mainstream education approaches. Inclusion is occasionally seen as a blend of mainstream and special education and can be problematic in the sense that it continues to retain its medical contours, resonant of individual, pathological origins (Ballard, 1999). A 'rights-based framework' is said to underpin the ideology and practice of inclusion and is considered particularly meaningful for promoting inclusive education. The fundamental principle of inclusive education is the valuing of diversity in the community and the contribution that every person has to make.

### **1.3.3. Policy and Legislative Framework (Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland)**

In both jurisdictions (Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland) there have been concerted attempts through policy and enabling legislation to enshrine the rights of the child to an appropriate education. This has resulted in the continuing development of systems at national and local level to ensure more equitable access to resources for disadvantaged pupils including those with special educational needs or a disability. These systems are outlined in the full report.

### **1.3.4. Teacher perceptions of inclusion**

Inclusive practice relies on knowledge, skills, understanding, resources and attitudes. Positive attitudes are a necessary starting point and the availability of physical and human support, has consistently been shown to be associated with positive attitudes to inclusion (Horne & Timmons, 2009). Studies have indicated that teachers who have been implementing inclusive programmes, and who have active experience of inclusion possess more positive attitudes. Research also highlights the importance of professional development in the establishment of teachers' positive attitudes (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). Teacher resistance to inclusion has been attributed to the challenges teachers face when attempting to implement inclusive practice. These challenges have been linked to teachers' lack of confidence relating to personal instruction, skills and availability of resources, teachers' inadequate professional development and the ability to deal with a variety of disabilities and/or special educational needs (Avisar, 2000).

### **1.3.5. Current Inclusive Practice: Challenges and Obstacles**

#### **a) Organisation, Structures and Teaching**

A positive school ethos and positive attitudes among staff are factors that have contributed significantly to the success of inclusion (Skidmore, 2004). There is strong agreement that meaningful inclusion encourages socialisation and the development of relationships between children with disabilities and/or special educational needs and their peers. It may also provide children with access to school in their own

geographical community and, help them become active participants in that community.

Hattie (2005) suggests that leadership involves the role of the principal, the ability of the school to function as an organisation committed to addressing the barriers to inclusion and the ability to support professional development through training and development for staff. Leadership and professional skills are requisite factors in the development of school capacity, and the role of the principal is seen as critical to the delivery of an inclusive educational programme and the realisation of the aspiration for increased capacity (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008). A whole-school approach has advanced the concept of support (Winter and Kilpatrick, 2001) and broadened the sense of responsibility beyond particular individuals (Florian & Rouse, 2001).

A re-conceptualisation of support teaching aligns practice towards supporting the whole class (Forlin, 2001). The role of the special needs assistant (SNA) has evolved internationally in supporting the care needs of the child in an educational context, under the direction of the class teacher (Garner, 2000). In more recent years a move towards mixed-ability teaching has aimed to address issues of inequity that had been associated with more traditional approaches to class organisation such as ability grouping /streaming of pupils.

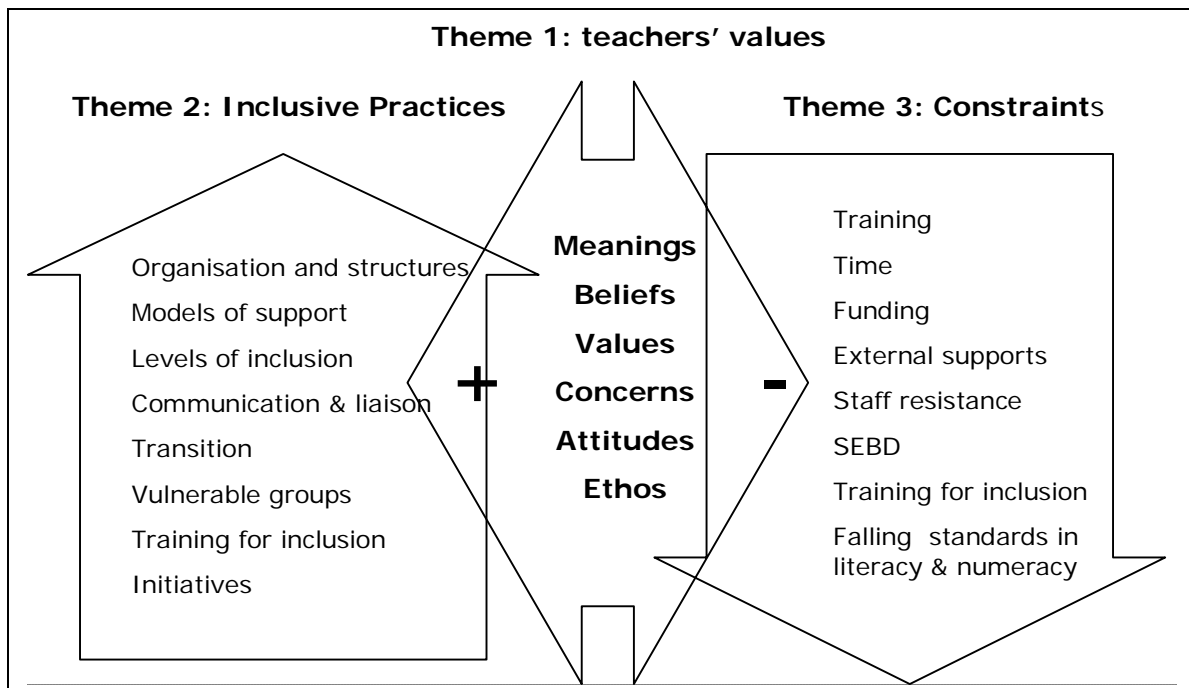
Teachers' ability to work inclusively may see a shift in emphasis from the more didactic teacher-led methods to more student-centred discovery, constructivist, or problem-solving and co-operative learning (Borko, Davinroy, Blien and Cumbo, 2003). Teachers' ability to implement varying instructional strategies may be dependent on confidence in their ability to cater for diverse needs, as well as knowledge of their students' needs. We can assume, therefore, that "differentiated instruction is 'responsive' teaching rather than 'one-size-fits-all' teaching" (Tomlinson, 2003, p.151). Westwood (2003) refers to differentiation as learning things differently according to learners' unique differences. Researchers have suggested a radical restructuring of professional development in special education moving away from low (INSET) level technical skill-based responses in relation to SEN, towards longer-term reflective training (Tilstone, 2003).

## **b) Developing Collaborative relationships**

Inclusion is not just a school issue; it is about children, parents and the community (Schwartz, Odom & Sandall, 1999). Parents are the primary and natural educators and caregivers, and provide for their child in the natural environment of the home. The parent/primary caregiver will be, by definition, the most insightful, knowledgeable, 'expert' on the needs and development of the child, because of their intimate knowledge and unique perspective (Carpenter, 1997). School entry, moving from primary to post-primary or transferring from one service to another are important transitions in the life of the child with SEN and notable in their potential for stress. Preparation, planning and parental involvement are critical in this process. Transitions should be anticipated and planned in advance as a collaborative exercise involving representatives from home and school.

## **1.4. *Thematic responses to inclusion in schools***

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with principals, class/subject teachers and support teachers working in a variety of schools across the island of Ireland produced three major themes and a number of sub-themes in the area of inclusion.



**Figure 1.1: Main themes and sub-themes arising in creating inclusive learning environments**

### 1.4.1. Teachers' values and perceptions of inclusion

In its broadest sense, inclusion describes the extent to which individual pupils are integrated within the educational system. The EPSEN Act, (2004) in the Republic of Ireland and the Code of Practice (DENI, 1998) in Northern Ireland mandate the creation of inclusive learning environments in Irish schools. Research has consistently shown that teacher perceptions and attitudes are key to successful inclusive practice (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Forlin, 2007).

An inclusive learning environment refers to a learning environment that regards and respects all pupils, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic background or special educational need. Respondents' perceptions about inclusive learning environments largely corroborated this definition. General perceptions about the value of inclusion in the study were largely positive. The majority of principals, teachers and support staff perceived inclusion as a challenge that promoted action and learning, rather than as a threat. Some interviewees believed that inclusion involved 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. The view that confidence comes from success in inclusion was apparent in many interviews. A positive experience of inclusion in a challenging situation seemed to provide schools with the confidence and skills required for further developing inclusive practice.

While many interviewees were positive about the inherent value of inclusion, in terms of special educational needs, many principals discussed fears about including children with significant needs which they had not experienced before. Principals and teachers seemed uneasy about unfamiliar territory. Pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and those with ADHD and autistic spectrum disorders were noted as a particular challenge in the majority of interviews. In some schools, pupils who experienced socio-economic disadvantage and/or difficult background circumstances were noted to require active strategies for inclusion. These pupils were

often deemed to be at high risk of educational failure and early school dropout. A clear theme that emerged from the interviews was that an inclusive ethos was highly correlated by respondents with a particular type of leadership style. Effective leadership in schools was reported to be associated with proactive leadership styles rather than reactive management styles.

### **1.4.2. Current Inclusive Practice**

A second theme which emerged from the analysis of the interview data focused on how schools were responding to the challenge of inclusion and what was working effectively. There appeared to be differences in the way inclusive practice was managed in post-primary schools compared with primary schools. It appeared from respondent's perceptions that the challenges of inclusion could be more complex at post-primary level in view of curricular complexity, timetabling, examination demands and possible adolescent resistance to support at this level.

#### **Organisation, support structures and teaching**

It was noted in the majority of interviews that in the changing climate relating to inclusion and equality, many school organisational structures had been revised in recent years. Whilst there was some variation between primary and post primary organisational structures, there were also a number of common features.

Academic screening was reported to be the major tool by which schools identified children who required additional support in school. Mixed-ability teaching was generally the norm at primary level. This was not always the case at second level. A number of interviewees aspired to increase their practice of mixed-ability teaching. However, perceptions indicated that there continued to be pressure from some staff and parents for streaming and banding of pupils. This pressure generally related to concerns about the potential impact of mixed ability grouping on academic progress and examination results for more able students.

All interviewees reported that support teams were central to effective inclusion in schools. Primary schools seemed to offer a more team-based approach to supporting inclusion whereas at post-primary support roles seemed to be more delineated. The majority of interviewees reported that mixed models of support involving combinations of group and individual withdrawal and in-class support or team teaching were used. While many interviewees spoke favourably about team teaching and in-class support, it continued to be for the most part either a new initiative or a practice that schools wished to introduce. In one girls' school included in the study, there was a view that the general allocation model (GAM) made it very difficult to meet pupil needs as this model underestimated the prevalence of special educational needs among girls. Availability of time, (organisation, planning, experience, training and communication skills emerged as key determinants of the effectiveness of support teaching. A number of interviewees discussed the importance of having adequately trained support staff which could be a particular issue at post-primary where mainstream teachers could be allocated support duties on an ad hoc basis. The need to have a member of staff with the responsibility for coordinating the support team was widely recommended.

Differentiation was frequently viewed as a skill rather than a practice and a number of interviewees did not feel that their training had adequately prepared them in the pedagogic skills required. The greatest focus in the interviews was on 'differentiation by output' – modifying the level of work, as well as the speed and quantity of work output. There was little discussion on the 'differentiation by input' – with teachers presenting work and information using different levels and media. The majority of

respondents reported that devising Individual Education Plans (IEPs) was an issue of concern. The interview data showed overriding support for the importance of special needs assistants (SNAs) in supporting inclusive practice, specifically for pupils with significant social, emotional and behavioural difficulties or physical disability.

The interview data also indicated that there was some variation in the way that curricular inclusion was managed at primary and secondary level; however, at both levels curricular inclusion could be encouraged by: access to a differentiated curriculum as per IEP and/or access to a restricted curriculum or timetable as appropriate. The importance of social interaction to child development and education was foremost in the mind of many interviewees. The quality of communication and opportunities for liaison between management, support staff, class teachers, and pupils, were identified as key factors which determine the effectiveness of inclusive practices. Collaboratively organised transition programmes were reported to be of huge assistance to parents and schools in facilitating this complex process.

In addition to pupils with special educational needs, the interviews identified other distinct groups of pupils who were perceived to be vulnerable to social, academic or physical segregation in schools. Pupils from the Travelling Community were mentioned as a vulnerable group in approximately 25% of interviews from participants in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These pupils were reported to be particularly vulnerable to both academic and social exclusion. Approximately 50% of interviewees in the Republic of Ireland reported that the increase in international pupils in recent years has had implications for inclusive practice. Whilst many international pupils are academically able and motivated, initial difficulties with English were understood to have made their inclusion problematic.

## **Constraints on Inclusion**

Effective inclusive practice is subject to a number of constraints and challenges including the requirement for support for teachers (professional development), adequate time, training, funding, professional support services, curriculum issues and falling standards in the basic subjects.

Inadequacies in training at undergraduate, postgraduate and on-the-job training were the most universally cited constraints to creating inclusive learning environments. Initial teacher training was reported to be lacking in the area of special educational needs and this was said to have had major implications for inclusive practice. A lack of progress on the formal implementation of IEPs was reported and this was linked to a lack of structured training and ongoing supervision. Time constraints were also cited by the majority of interviewees as a barrier to effective inclusive practice, specifically: for administration, paperwork and correcting homework, for developing policy, for staff liaison and collaboration, including collaborative planning time, for liaison with parents and for the development of individual plans and programmes. Inadequate, unstructured opportunities for liaison between class teachers, support staff, parents and other professionals were also seen as a major constraint. At the classroom level, the data indicated that there was limited time for differentiation by input and output, developing IEPs and doing other administrative work, whilst struggling to deliver the curriculum. On the whole-school level it was reported that there was limited dedicated time for developing inclusive practice through training days, staff meetings and in-service.

On the whole, interviewees believed that greater access to psychological services for assessment and support/advice on interventions would assist them in creating more inclusive learning environments in the longer term. A number of schools in the Republic of Ireland reported that they found liaising with their assigned special

educational needs organiser (SENO) in relation to accommodations and resources helpful. However, there was consensus that the regulations which SENOs applied were too rigid, and in some cases unachievable. Parental involvement and support were widely reported to be important limiting factors.

Curricular demands at primary level and meeting standards in certificate examinations at post-primary level were cited by some interviewees in both jurisdictions as obstacles to inclusion. A resource teacher pointed out that in relation to resistance to inclusion amongst teachers, fear of the unknown, fear of criticism and ultimately fear of failure were crucial factors. Some interviewees reported that some teachers were resistant to differentiating the curriculum for weaker pupils.

Perhaps the most important factor in changing teacher attitudes cited was the experience of success with inclusion itself. Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties were reported to be on the increase in terms of severity, complexity and prevalence and teachers reported that the support systems were inadequate or too slow to respond. Major concern was expressed at the extent to which significantly challenging behaviour infringed upon the rights of all pupils and teachers. There was a strong sense of frustration about managing very challenging behaviour on a day-to-day basis and its negative effects on the learning environment. The perceived falling achievement levels in basic literacy and mathematics were said to be making the job of inclusion more challenging at both primary and post-primary level. In addition, the range of attainment in basic literacy and numeracy levels within the classroom setting presents huge challenges for mixed-ability teaching and differentiation.

## **1.5. *Conclusions***

Creating inclusive learning environments is a complex, multi-dimensional task and, according to the participants in this research study, while significant progress has been achieved there remain serious obstacles to realising this type of inclusion in our schools. This study revealed that schools in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are in the process of developing inclusive learning environments and a number of schools appear to be more advanced in this process. Some schools had highly developed policies supporting inclusion though others appeared to be in the process of developing appropriate policies. Participants commented on the sheer scale of change experienced by schools in a relatively brief time period. As a result, schools are endeavouring to respond appropriately to the range of need presented by these children and young people. This involves a multi-dimensional response that acknowledges the complexity of need and recognises that changes will be required in school organisation, support services, classroom teaching and external support.

Even the most proactive respondents identified that there are a number of important constraints in the process. Having the 'right attitude' is insufficient on its own. Constraints identified by respondents include the dearth of appropriate continuing professional development, the lack of time for collaboration and co-ordination among teachers and inadequate structures for accessing necessary external professional support. This study highlights how teachers perceive great challenges in terms of exam-focused rigid curricula, escalating challenging behaviour, falling achievement levels in literacy and numeracy, increasing prevalence of English as a second language and children who are educationally vulnerable as a consequence of socio-economic disadvantage. It is difficult to evaluate the relative impact of each of these factors as they are largely interactive.

From this small scale study it is possible to conclude that further intensive support is required at systemic and local level to ensure continued progress towards the



development of inclusive learning environments. At systemic level it is essential that the current support infrastructure be strengthened to provide sustained support for schools as they address complex issues relating to special educational needs. In addition, this support infrastructure needs to be reconfigured to ensure that education and health agencies liaise at all levels to provide a coherent accessible service for schools and students with special educational needs. Professional development opportunities are essential for schools and teachers in order to address special educational issues effectively. Teachers require time to collaborate and plan for an inclusive learning environment.

We can conclude that teacher perceptions and teacher experiences are critical to developing inclusive learning environments. Positive, accepting attitudes create the foundation for inclusive practice, though as international research has indicated, and this research has corroborated, positive teacher attitudes are insufficient to guarantee the successful implementation of inclusive practice.

From this study it is clear that teachers feel that achieving this complex task requires inclusive thinking and action at all levels; adequate funding at systemic level; proactive leadership within schools; responsive support infrastructure; ongoing professional development and time for joint planning; developing collaborative relationships between schools, parents and support agencies; and effective interventions by support agencies. Societal responses to diversity need to be multi-faceted and schools and teachers can play a critical role in enabling children and young people with disabilities and/or special educational needs to become meaningful participants within society.