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Perceptions of the barriers to effective inclusion in one primary school: voices of teachers and teaching assistants

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Abstract

This study examined the barriers to inclusion in one primary school in the North of England. Qualitative data was collected from teachers and teaching assistants through the use of a focus group. The evidence suggested that practices within the school were varied and ranged from highly inclusive to highly exclusive. Some teachers worked in good faith to develop effective inclusion for learners with special educational needs. Conversely, other teachers displayed negative attitudes towards these pupils and this impacted negatively on the school's commitment to inclusion. Lack of funding, resources and training were identified as key barriers to inclusion. Parental resistance to inclusion was also evident within the context of this school and there was a strong feeling that the inclusion agenda was problematic in the context of the standards agenda. Despite these issues there was a strong sense that practitioners should be willing to commit to the principles of inclusive education and the study considers some ways in which schools can advance their practice in this aspect. Within this study the term 'practitioner' is used to represent teachers and teaching assistants.

Key words: Inclusion, special educational needs

Introduction

Although inclusion has dominated UK educational policy since 1997, the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs* (UNESCO, 1994) demonstrated an international commitment to the principle of inclusive education and more specifically, to the principle of *regular* schools for all learners. According to Cole (2005), 'the last 20 years have seen a significant policy move both nationally and internationally, towards educational inclusion' (p.334). Changing values about children with special needs has influenced policy and practice and legislation now emphasises the rights of disabled people to full participation and equality of opportunity in every aspect of life.

Despite inclusion dominating the educational landscape, there is a lack of clarity regarding its translation in practice (Sikes et al, 2007). Some literature suggests that inclusion is about the quality of learning and participation rather than a common place of learning (DFES, 2004; Warnock, 2005). However practitioners have different interpretations of inclusion and this interpretation affects how inclusion is performed (Sikes et al, 2007).

A focus group was used to collect the data. The participants were either teachers or teaching assistants from one school in the north of England. The interview schedule is presented in figure 1. The study complied with agreed ethical conventions set by the British Educational Research Association.

Results

Clear themes emerged during the interview. These were identified as key barriers to effective inclusion.

Attitudinal barriers

Attitudinal barriers were a recurring theme in the data. It is clear that inclusion will remain a significant challenge if practitioners are not committed to its principles and it will be impossible if practitioners fail to embrace their responsibilities for the education of all children. One practitioner identified ways in which the standards agenda can shape negative practitioner attitudes in relation to inclusion:

I was at a meeting before the child started school and the teacher who was going to be involved with John actually put up strong barriers before he arrived. She said she couldn't cope with him before he started at the school and that she had to focus on getting her class through the SATs. She was negative from the word go. She never gave him a chance. John never actually really went into the classroom. He went into a classroom by himself and barricaded himself in. He was isolated in his own room. The school failed him. (Bev)

It is difficult to separate inclusion from personal values. Practitioner values influence the ways in which inclusion is implemented on the ground. Cole's research (Cole, 2005) provides insight into the views of mother-teachers who had children with special educational needs. Her data illustrates that teachers, above all, need to demonstrate that they are prepared to give inclusion a try and '...if there was 'good faith', then it was worth the effort' (p.341). Thus, genuine inclusion demands a degree of risk-taking. Cole questions whether 'as a society shouldn't we be the ones willing to take more positive risks?...to

be willing to commit ourselves to the challenge of inclusion; to commit ourselves to 'good faith and effort' in the cause of equity and social justice' (2005: 342). Sadly, Bev illustrates that not all practitioners are prepared to take this risk. In this example, the school claimed that by enrolling John, that they were demonstrating their commitment to inclusion. In reality John was taught in his own classroom with his own teachers. The practice was exclusive and resulted in John being categorised by his differences. The example also illustrates that there is a lack of shared understanding of what constitutes inclusion. This point is supported by Avramidis et al (2002) who argue that '*inclusion* is a bewildering concept which can have a variety of interpretations and applications' (p.158). Sally also supports this by commenting that:

We all have our own ideas of what inclusion means. For some teachers it doesn't mean the child being involved in everything in the classroom. Everybody has their own individual idea of what it means and for some people it simply means the child being in the building. (Sally)

Inclusion is difficult to do without support from the school's senior management team. My data highlighted the frustration felt by a practitioner when the Head teacher accused her of neglecting her responsibilities to the rest of the class whilst she addressed the specific needs of one child:

I was dealing with Sam's behaviour one day. The Head came in and said...I have never before been into a classroom where a teacher has been off task dealing with a child. Sam will have to go. This infuriated me. I said...where have you been? Do you really believe what you have just said to me? In the past few years I have had several children with behavioural issues- Lewis, Ethan and Charlotte. On occasions I have been off-task for the first few months when these children have come in as I have been supporting them. (Libby)

Libby had recognised that Sam needed time before he could be genuinely included into the school. Thus, inclusion is a process rather than a change of state. Libby had experience over several years of children with behavioural issues and she stressed that the first half term was often the most challenging. During this time Libby focused on developing strategies to support children's specific needs. For Libby, it was crucial that senior staff understood that the process of inclusion for individual children takes time, patience and energy. Unfortunately this support from her line manager was not evident and Sam was excluded on the grounds that he was having an adverse impact on the efficient education of the rest of his peers. Libby was devastated that the management team was not prepared to take the risk.

Sally also voiced similar issues about the lack of genuine commitment to try to make inclusion work:

For a lot of teachers inclusion is not a priority. They have to focus on getting results. If it is too difficult they try to stop it. All you have to say is that a child is disruptive and that you can't handle him. They say that unless they have support they cannot cope. They do not try to make things work by looking at what they do. They voice loudly to parents about the effect the child is having on the others and then they have parental backing to get the child out. (Sally)

Teaching style was a recurrent theme, which was identified as a key barrier to inclusion:

We've got a teacher who sees his job as just to teach and get them through the SATs. He expects every child to conform and that is against inclusion. You can't have a child coming in with behaviour problems and the teacher not recognising these problems. It is the difference between- if there is a problem in the classroom...blaming the child, or thinking...what can I do to make this easier? Or what is wrong with my environment if I am not meeting this child's needs. That is a

massive difference. Teaching styles have a lot to do with it. Inclusion is harder if you just want them all to sit there quietly. (Fran)

It will be interesting to see how his next teacher copes because he won't continue what we have started. I don't think he will last very long. The child will meet fire with fire. He will not tolerate his behaviour- he likes them all to be quiet! (Joan)

These comments illustrate that some practitioners are unwilling to change their approaches and apply systems flexibly in order to meet the needs of individual children. Fran emphasises the need for teachers to reflect on their pedagogical approaches rather than locating the source of the difficulty within the child. In this respect, Fran has embraced a social model of disability rather than a medical perspective, which takes a 'within-child' view of children's difficulties. For practitioners to fully embrace inclusion, it is necessary to reflect on one's own practice and be willing to make changes to teaching styles, systems and routines. This flexibility is central to the development of inclusive educational environments. Joan's comment serves to remind practitioners that the process of inclusion starts with them. Practitioners not only need to commit themselves to the challenge of inclusion (Cole, 2005) but also commit themselves to a process of reflecting on their own values and beliefs.

One-to-one support

The participant emphasised the need to balance the provision of individual support with children's social development. There was a strong feeling that

support away from the classroom is detrimental to pupils' self-esteem and fosters a climate of dependency.

Some one-to-one sessions are appropriate. It's the idea of one-to-one in terms of one child; one adult and they stick together all day, every day. We see it happening in our school. This is hopeless because if a child has someone next to them all the time you are setting them apart from all of the others. The child will become dependent. (Sally)

For children who already have low self-esteem, educating them out of the class emphasises their difficulties both to themselves and others. This will reduce self-esteem even further. Teaching assistants should support children inside the classroom so that they do not feel alienated. If they are sent out of the room it makes them feel 'stupid' and 'thick'. Most low ability children have low self-esteem anyway and things are often said by their peers which make them feel embarrassed, maybe even ashamed. Sending them out of class to work with a TA will exacerbate these feelings. I prefer to work inside a classroom where I am part of everything. (Mark)

It is about everyone knowing the children, not just the support staff being palmed off with the low abilities and that's what it amounts to. We know of support staff in our school who are writing review reports about the children because the teacher does not know them. We are paid for that responsibility. I heard a teacher say she was not paid to 'baby-sit' children who she felt were incapable of learning. She just sends them out of class with a member of support staff. Some teachers are not capable of writing reports on children because they simply do not know them. (Bev)

There is an argument for individual support for children outside classrooms so that they are better able to access the curriculum when they go back in. Short-term intervention programmes, for example in literacy, are an example of this. However, if it is long term it can be dangerous. Aiden was a lovely little boy and used to come to me and chat. He also used to chat to the others. However, after he had worked with Hilary outside of the classroom for a year I didn't recognise him. He became shy and withdrawn and did not know how to mix or have a conversation. (Sally)

I feel strongly about teachers sending the same group out with support staff all the time. Every child should have access to a teacher. I've seen it over and over again in our school. Some support staff educate one group, the lower group usually. The teachers don't want to deal with them. They send them out of class and leave the support staff to get on with it. (Sally)

Bev and Sally emphasise here the need for teachers to accept their responsibility for the education of all children. The evidence presented here suggests that teachers often abdicate this responsibility and consequently demonstrate low expectations of learners with special educational needs.

Team work

All participants stressed that effective inclusion depends on the availability of support in the classroom and the practitioners frequently referred to the importance of classroom support for supporting children with behavioural difficulties:

It is a team thing. When I first had Lewis there would be times when I would ask other team members to take over because I had had enough. If you work as a team you can do that. When you get to the point when you know you won't deal with it appropriately you can hand over to someone else. If you are all aware of the strategies that work it's easy. Nobody in my room is any more important than anyone else. (Bev)

Whether inclusion works depends on the level of support teachers have in their classes, especially for pupils with behavioural difficulties. You need at least two or three adults in the class- someone to deal with the child with the problems, someone to hand over to when you get desperate and someone to teach the others. (Joan)

Standards agenda

There was a strong sense of feeling that the standards agenda prevented practitioners from effectively implementing inclusion. This emerged as the strongest barrier to inclusion and teacher attitudes towards inclusion were also linked to the standards agenda. The two policy agendas were seen as oppositional rather than complementary:

We know from our experience that it has affected our performance. One year we had a lot of children with statements and it pulled down our results. The Head had to justify this to OFSTED. But we cannot send back our raw material. It is not right to exclude on these grounds. That is really true. We have to include everybody and inclusion is more important than test results. The current climate, where schools are judged on results, is the problem-not inclusion. If we believe in what we are doing and we believe it is right to include these children, we have to be prepared to justify our results. (Bev)

Last year the head stopped two members of staff from going through Upper Pay Scale 2 because they did not get high enough levels. They have not been awarded a pay rise for the past three years and their pupils have made progress. It's just that the progress isn't in line with national expectations. (Mark)

You can raise standards if you ignore the rest and work with your borderline groups. These are the children who some teachers target. I don't, I give them all time, but some teachers just teach the middle ones and hold the others. You hear them talking about it in the staff room. (Sally)

The voices illustrate ways in which the marketisation of schools impacts on the inclusion agenda. The issues raised by Mark and Sally help to explain why practitioners may target some learners over others. In the current educational climate schools and teachers are held to account for their results. The temptation to focus on those learners who will make the biggest difference to a school's results is understandable, however unjust this may appear. Those learners with learning difficulties become problematic for schools. In terms of overall standards, these learners are likely to have a detrimental impact on school performance data, especially in small schools. Thus 'educating children with special educational needs seems to present risks on many levels...' (Cole, 2005: 342).

The current emphasis on raising attainment of children with special educational needs is also hugely problematic for learners themselves. Lloyd

(2008) emphasises that current educational policy focuses on compensatory measures, which aim to enable all learners to achieve norm-related standards. This system perpetuates a 'deficit view of children' (Lloyd, 2008: 234) and fails to embrace diversity (Lloyd, 2008) by attempting to normalise all learners. This is echoed by Armstrong (2005) who argues that 'narrowly conceived performance criteria are central to the rhetoric of inclusion advanced by New Labour's education policy' (p.147).

According to Giroux (2003) 'educators ... should reject all forms of schooling that marginalize students...' (p.10). The current focus on narrowing the attainment gap between those learners with and without special educational needs results in

compensatory and deficit approaches geared towards the normalisation and indeed standardization, of groups and individuals rather than contributing to the *denormalization* of the institutions, systems and rules which comprise education and schooling.

(Lloyd, 2008: 228)

The ways in which the notion of success is conceptualised is 'hostile to the notion of full participation' (Lloyd, 2008: 229) and results in failure and marginalisation of those learners with special educational needs who are unable to reach the standards. Current policy therefore constructs all learners as able and such a construction of the learner is hugely problematic for students with disabilities and or special educational needs who require the support of others (Goodley, 2007). The tensions between the inclusion

agenda and the standards agenda create an uneasy relationship and 'in such a relationship there will be winners and losers and it is suggested that the losers will be the children who are deemed as having special educational needs' (Cole, 2005: 334). Lloyd (2008) emphasises the need to reconceptualise achievement to make it 'attainable and accessible to all' (p.229).

Location

There was no shared agreement amongst the participant about whether special schools posed a threat to the inclusion agenda:

Special schools have a purpose. No teacher wants to see a child miserable or not joining in because they can't cope in mainstream schools. Sometimes we are doing them an injustice by keeping them in mainstream. It is better for them sometimes to go to a special school and learn important life skills such as cooking and sewing. (Sue)

Sue emphasises here that special schools have the potential to offer more meaningful experiences for some learners with special needs and therefore she does not associate inclusion with location. For Sue, effective inclusion related to the quality and relevance of the provision, not the location. Warnock (2005) also shares this view.

It is not clear-cut. It boils down to the needs of the child as to whether a special or a mainstream school is most appropriate. However, we should give them a chance in mainstream first. (Bev)

The idea of a unit with specialist staff working alongside mainstream staff can work quite well. However I do not agree with segregated special schools. In a resource-base the pupils can be partially included into the mainstream and inclusion can gradually increase if the child is coping. The mainstream teachers also have access to specially trained staff on-site. (Sally)

Bev's point about giving children a chance in the mainstream is echoed by the mother-teachers in Cole's study (Cole, 2005). In this study the participants spoke of the need for teachers to demonstrate that they were trying and committed to inclusion through 'good faith and effort' (Cole, 2005: 341).

Parental resistance

Many of the participants spoke about parental resistance to inclusion. The interview data revealed that parents were most resistant to the inclusion of children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream schools. Many of the participants were able to give examples of parents who had questioned whether placements were appropriate and had expressed anxieties about the detrimental impact on their child's education. The data suggests that parents start to resist inclusion when there is a cost to their own child's efficient education:

Some children get tarred with a brush by the way other parents and some children react to them. One parent has withdrawn her child as a result of a boy in my class. She saw me three times about it before her child joined the school about the child she was concerned about. She didn't give him a chance. She blamed everything on him and always pointed the finger at him. Eventually she took her child out of school because she said this child was always bullying her child. In actual fact it was both of them. At least now the child has a chance. The child who has gone knew how to press his buttons. (Bev)

Training

There was strong feeling that many of the participants felt inadequately trained to educate children with special educational needs:

Our training is appalling. In my training special educational needs was non-existent. We are given these children and it's down to intuition how you deal with them. I wasn't trained how to deal with children who are autistic or who have EBD. I wasn't trained how to deal with children who have speech and language difficulties. You hope that outside agencies will be there to support you but very often they are not. Often there is a lack of money and the support just isn't there. (Bev)

It's sink or swim a lot of the time. (Mark)

How many times did we ask to go on a handling course for Lewis? I didn't want to get hurt and I didn't want to hurt him. He needed to be restrained but no one would show me what to do. (Joan)

To keep other children safe you have to restrain them. But the authority won't back you; they won't give you training in case the parents prosecute them. So they leave it to the teachers to take the risk. I want to say to the inclusionists...tell me how to include a child who kicks, screams and batters the others. Give me the training. But they won't. In an open-plan school if you don't restrain it will be chaos. No one will tell you what to do because you could hold them to it. (Sally)

Resources

Lack of resources was identified as a barrier to effective inclusion:

When we had Susie we had to fight to get a guard to support her with swimming. She had cerebral palsy. Eventually we got one and he lowered her into the pool. She loved it. However, it took months and months to get to that stage. (Joyce)

Discussion

Goodley emphasises that:

Too often, when we think of involving students in educational practices, we assume students to be able, productive, skilled, accountable individuals who are ready and willing to lead developments within the classroom...in short our students are 'able'. Such a construction of the learner is hugely problematic for students with disabilities and or special educational needs who require the support of others.

(Goodley, 2007: 321)

Current educational policy on inclusive education assumes uncritically that educators can narrow the gap between the attainment of learners with and without special educational needs. There is an assumption that the disabled learner can transform themselves if the right conditions are provided (Goodley, 2007) and 'academic excellence is troubled by those who might never be capable of (nor interested in) such achievements' (Goodley, 2007: 322).

The marketisation of education views learners with special needs as being in need of remediation and correction in order to normalise them. The Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs (DFES, 2001) and its graduated response through the use of processes such as *School Action and School Action Plus*, and instruments such as individual education plans, views these learners as 'eternally lacking' (Goodley, 2007). These 'compensatory and deficit approaches' (Lloyd, 2008: 228) emphasise the need for learners to conform rather than celebrating their differences (Lloyd, 2008). Consequently learners with special educational needs are categorised by their differences and ultimately failed by an education system that claims to be inclusive as the standards, for many, are unattainable. For learners with special educational needs their differences are made visible and the constant intervention, support and monitoring perpetuates the sense of failure.

Paradoxically, rather than *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (DFES, 2004), current educational policy erects the very barriers it claims to remove (Lloyd, 2008). Despite the advances made in recent years by the social model of disability, the education system for children with special educational needs is based on a medical model. It adopts a 'within-child' view of the problem and constructs difference and diversity as problematic. Armstrong (2005) has emphasised that:

Inclusion is a normative concept ... The policy of inclusion is aimed not at promoting equity...but at establishing narrow cultural parameters of normality to which all must have the opportunity to conform.

(Armstrong, 2005: 147)

The Code of Practice (DFES, 2001) serves as a mechanism for regulation and the compensatory measures inherent within it constitute a rejection of *difference* and *diversity*. Rather than celebrating these, the Code seeks to stamp them out. The graduated response ultimately categorises children by their impairments. After years of intervention, support and remediation, learners with special educational needs are still constructed as failures because they are unable to reach the standards that have been uncritically accepted as the norm for all learners. The voices presented in my study illustrate how this assumption penalises not only children but also practitioners and schools. All are failed, categorised and marked as a result of situating policies of inclusion within a standards agenda.

Lloyd (2008) stresses the need to denormalise schools and the systems within them. She rightly emphasises the need to develop a broader notion of terms such as *success* and *achievement* to make them attainable for learners with special educational needs. In this climate of marketisation, Goodley (2007) emphasises the need to resist over-coding and to reject labels as the basis for defining the individual learner. Learners need to be viewed as productive (in many ways) rather than lacking, and educators need to embrace creative pedagogies at the same time as rejecting pedagogies which seek to pathologise learners by their differences (Goodley, 2007).

My study has identified the need for practitioners to develop a shared understanding of what inclusive practice should look like. It has also identified the need for practitioners to reflect on their own values in relation to the education of children with special educational needs. The participants were able to identify practitioners who were resistant to take seriously their responsibility for the education of children with special educational needs for a variety of reasons. For example Joan and Fran emphasise that children with behavioural issues presented a risk to the established order in the classroom. Bev talks about the reluctance of the school management team to enrol children with special educational needs due to the detrimental impact that it would have on school performance indicators.

Teacher resistance to children with special educational needs is understandable. Cole (2005) emphasises that inclusion presents as risk on many levels. For teachers, children with behavioural issues may test their

skills and patience and have a detrimental impact on the education of the majority. Children with special educational needs can have an adverse effect on school attainment data and individual teachers are held to account on the basis of their scores. However, the labelling process results in fixed identities being imposed on learners with special educational needs and this clouds the way in which practitioners perceive children and it taints the ways in which learners come to view themselves. This can have a detrimental impact on self-esteem and can perpetuate further failure. Behavioural issues and educational failure may be conceived in terms of a response to the imposed identities which children with special educational needs have been forced to assimilate.

Current educational policy of narrowing the gap between learners with and without special educational needs will continue to marginalise those learners who, for whatever reason, are incapable of reaching the same normative standards as the majority. Goodley's work (Goodley, 2007) helps schools to embrace new pedagogies which enable practitioners to view learners as 'becoming-learners' (p.328) and reject normalisation through the use of remedial compensatory approaches. Current policy erects barriers to participation and achievement for learners with special educational needs and practitioners are held to account if the barriers are insurmountable.

However, it is not sufficient for schools and practitioners to embrace new pedagogies in the absence of a change in educational policy. The current system of judging all children by the same normative standards is outdated.

According to Slee (2001) 'schooling has always produced exclusion' (p.113).

The time is now ripe for change and educational policy needs to reject the principles of modernity upon which it is currently based.

The assessment system needs to be modified to recognise pupils' individual strengths in a range of areas, rather than the current preoccupation with standards in literacy and numeracy. Lloyd (2008) encourages us to think about a new system, which enables different learners to participate in different games, rather than all learners joining in the same game. The voices presented in my study suggest that there are many barriers to inclusion in this mainstream school and I suspect that many teachers in schools across the country are voicing similar concerns. The problems arise fundamentally because we are trying to force all learners to reach the same standards and subject them to the same pedagogical processes. This often manifests itself in resistance, often in the form of behavioural issues.

This obsession with one size fits all results negative practitioner attitudes.

Practitioners feel threatened by these learners, not because they have negative views on disability, but because these learners threaten their performance data and consequently their identity as good educators.

Additionally, parents may resist inclusion because of the risk it poses to the academic performance of their own child. Practitioners feel that they need more training to manage children's behaviour and to support them in narrowing the gaps between the attainment of learners with and without special educational needs.

Practitioners need to have the courage to experiment with new pedagogies. The need to celebrate difference and diversity is paramount, rather than trying to normalise it. Educators need to reject the imposition of labels, which categorise and impose fixed identities upon individuals. Children need to be allowed to demonstrate their own unique strengths and genuine personalised learning is the way to equity. Achievement and attainment needs to be re-conceptualised so that different achievements are recognised, valued and celebrated. Change at practice level need to be accompanied by a change in policy. The current was in which personalised learning has been conceived bears little resemblance to genuine child-centred education. Current policy situates personalised learning within the standards agenda, which instrumentally acts as a barrier to participation and achievement. Finally, policy makers should devise new games for different learners to play rather than expecting all learners to join in and submit to the rules of one game. Perhaps then, the barriers to inclusion, which have been identified in this paper, will be dismantled.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the barriers to inclusion voiced by practitioners in one primary school. Several barriers were evident but the standards agenda emerged as the key barrier to pupils' participation and achievement. Policy change is necessary to break down these barriers and practitioners on the ground need to be empowered to embrace alternative pedagogies. Further

research is needed into the nature of alternative pedagogies so those practitioners can start to re-shape their own practice. However, in the predicted absence of such policy change, practitioners will, understandably, lack the courage to action real genuine change.

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