Understanding the educational experiences of young people with special educational needs

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Abstract: In recent years international efforts to promote a more equitable and inclusive education system have resulted in changes in policy, with an emphasis upon ensuring that students who would in the past have been educated in segregated provision receive greater opportunities in mainstream schools (Ballard 1999, Mitchell 2005). As a focus upon inclusive schooling has increased, so has a debate about efficacy and the management of schools to become more accessible to a diverse range of learners ensued (Allan 1999, Skidmore 2004). The views of teachers, educational policy makers and other professional colleagues have inevitably influenced the discourse in this area and have had an impact upon the pace of change both in schools and at national policy level. Within the debates, which have surrounded the development of inclusion, the voices of service providers have been dominant. This paper examines progress towards inclusion by considering the views of young people described as having special educational needs who have recent first hand experience of schooling. The paper draws upon evidence from several research projects conducted in England and Ireland (Garner 2000, Kenny et al 2000, Shevlin and Rose 2003, Rose and Shevlin 2004, Rose and Jones 2007) in which young people have reflected upon and described their educational experiences. Consideration is given to the challenges of researching the voices of learners and in particular the difficulties of interpretation.
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The commitment towards development of a more inclusive approach to the education of young people described as having special educational needs is reflected in a plethora of legislation which has influenced school provision in countries across the globe (Ambrukaitis and Ruškus 2003, Lim and Tan 2004, Timmons and Alur 2004, Mitchell 2005, Yarnaguci 2005). Policy development has purported to focus upon the elimination of the marginalisation of groups of students, who have previously received an education in situations where they are segregated from their peers, or in some instances have been denied access to schooling as a result of being labelled in respect of their learning needs or disability. A recognition that the rights of all students to receive an appropriate education has been at times neglected or has failed to gain a high priority upon national education agendas has led to a range of actions towards the development of more equitable educational provision. An increased research focus upon the social and educational needs of students who have previously been denied access to appropriate learning opportunities has increased understanding with regards to what can be achieved when skilled teachers, students and parents form effective partnerships. As pressures to review existing school structures or improve provision have increased, so has an appreciation of the nature of the challenge of developing inclusive education systems become clearer. The past twenty-five years may be seen as a period of considerable progress towards a greater understanding of how students with special educational needs learn and the strategies which teachers may adopt in order to ensure that they receive an education appropriate to their needs. However, whilst this understanding has increased, the implementation of inclusion has often been driven by policy initiatives based upon political expediency and has in many instances given insufficient consideration to what has been learned about pedagogy or classroom management.

A political agenda, which seeks to develop inclusive schooling as a means of addressing previous violations of human rights, is both laudable and long overdue. Those who have campaigned for improved access to education in an environment which ensures that all students have opportunities to learn alongside their peers (Rizvi and Lingard 1996, Barton 2003) have played an important role in bringing issues to the forefront of an international political agenda. It is undoubtedly as a result of the pressures placed upon governments by such campaigners that greater recognition of the needs of learners with special educational needs and disabilities has received attention through documents such as the Jomtien Declaration (UNESCO 1990) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). However, it has become increasingly apparent that the challenges presented in developing a more inclusive education system cannot be address solely through well intentioned policies and that a greater understanding of how professional attitudes, teaching practices and professional development can be changed to support inclusion is crucial if effective progress is to be made.

In recent years the gap between the ideology of inclusion and the reality of practice has been highlighted by a number of writers and researchers (Croll and Moses 2000, Crockett 2001, Kivirauma, Klemelä and Rinne 2006). Whilst acknowledging that considerable progress towards inclusion has been made, these writers emphasise that there are concerns expressed by teachers and others, that in some cases what passes for inclusive schooling is at best tokenistic and at times detrimental to the achievements of some learners. An emphasis upon transition of students from segregated special provision to mainstream schooling has highlighted the challenges presented by some learners, but has all too often ignored the need for a greater understanding of those teaching approaches which can best support learning. The focus upon inclusion as a locational issue, concerned to see all students educated together in mainstream classrooms, has a times detracted from the need to understand those factors which enable students to become effective learners and well adjusted members of society. As a result, significant numbers of students have experienced schooling, which has failed to recognise or address their learning needs, leading to frustration and in some instances social isolation. Similarly, some teachers have expressed themselves ill prepared to meet the needs of an increasingly challenging mainstream school population and have expressed their disillusionment with an education system which leaves them feeling inadequate in the face of a new interrogation of their practice (Croll and Moses 2000). Concerns have emerged that the political expediency of inclusion has failed to provide the necessary support for teachers who, whilst concerned to ensure effective teaching for all students in their classes, are frustrated by the lack of training, resources and infrastructure to enable them to afford the quality of education which they would hope to provide.

The criticism, which we make here, is not with the philosophy or concept of inclusion as an issue of individual rights. It is rather aimed at the ways in which its promotion has been promulgated and the difficulties, which have emerged as a result of poor management and implementation of inadequate policies. Concerns have recently been expressed that the gap between policies of inclusion and the preparation of teachers and other professionals to provide an effective education to students with complex learning needs may result in the rejection of the very students for whom those policies were intended (Rimland 1993, Kauffman and Hallahan, 1995, Keller 2000). It is apparent that the need for further investigation into those practices, which are supportive of the learning of students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms, remains critical to the future success of this approach. Whilst our appreciation of specific teaching strategies and their efficacy in respect of students with special educational needs has increased (Howley and Kime 2003, Jordan-Black 2005), the challenges of managing these approaches within mainstream

classrooms and of equipping teachers to deliver effective interventions remains central to the delivery of inclusive schooling. An appreciation of teaching strategies alone will not suffice in respect of delivering a more inclusive approach to schooling. Teachers need to gain insights into the impact of teaching and the ways in which they may organise their work in order to provide for a full range of needs and abilities in their classrooms.

Why listen to student voices?
    Listening to the voices of young people who have experienced education in a range of settings can provide insights into how schools may adapt to meet a full range of pupil needs and abilities. Research recently conducted in the UK and the Republic of Ireland has focused upon providing young people with an opportunity to express their own experiences of education. It has similarly enabled them to provide a critical commentary on those approaches and practices, which have either supported or inhibited their learning (Garner 2000, Shevlin and Rose 2003, Mortimer 2004, Rose and Jones 2007). Inevitably, seeking the views of young people is fraught with difficulties in respect of verification of the information provided and in ensuring that the essential ethical considerations associated with researching the lives of individuals are maintained. Noyes (2005) emphasises the necessity to be aware of the power which adults possess when working with and seeking the views of young people. Issues of suggestibility and the desire of young people to please the adult by providing the answers, which they believe to be sought, necessitate particular care on the part of the researcher working in this area. Where students exhibit those difficulties with understanding often associated with special educational needs, additional vigilance is essential when interpreting interview data to ensure that their ideas are not mis-represented. Verification by enabling interviewees to comment upon transcripts and critique the interpretation of the researcher should be the norm rather than anticipating an accurate reading by the researcher alone. The voices of people from marginalised groups, including those with special educational needs have traditionally been ignored and it is beholding upon researchers now to ensure that they are spared further repression through misinterpretation. For this reason, the views of young people reported here are extracted only from research, which has been subject to a process of review, by those individuals who participated in the various investigations. The insights provided by these individuals enable a commentary to be made upon their recent and current experiences of education. As such they may afford opportunities for those charged with responsibilities for the development of inclusion policies or their implementation to identify those conditions which either support or inhibit appropriate educational experiences.

    An analysis of interview data from studies conducted in the UK and Republic of Ireland reveals a number of recurring themes with regards to the educational experiences of young people described as having special educational needs. These themes if ignored will lead to a continued frustration on the part of learners with special educational needs and are equally destined to inhibit progress towards greater inclusion. In order to discuss each of the themes emerging from the studies considered in this paper, a priority is given to the voices of the young people who gave their time to talk with researchers and who provide unique insights into their experiences of education. The words of these young people are presented exactly as spoken and have not been subjected to any process of editing. These excerpts are accompanied by our own commentary on the issues and a reflection on how, as professionals, we may learn from their experiences.

NB. The excerpts used in this paper are coded according to the research projects from which they are extracted. The specific projects are referenced in the bibliography and the codes here used are as follows:-

(HV) Hidden Voices
(EC) Encouraging Voices
(NCNC) No Choice: No Chance

Expectations

Many young people with special educational needs express their frustration at the low expectations of teachers and others in schools in respect of what they could do and might achieve. A feeling that teachers are content to use the disability of the learner as a reason why they may not achieve pervaded many of the interviews conducted as part of the studies reviewed. Such low expectations are typified by the comments of a young lady with cerebral palsy

> *I began to realise that certain teachers would praise my work regardless of the amount of effort I had made or the quality of the work produced. As a consequence of this I became lazy and did not make as much effort as I should. I suspect that if I had been able-bodied they would have had a different attitude.* (EV)

Recognising the impact which low expectations on the part of teachers had upon her educational experience and attainment, this same individual reflects upon how a teacher who arrived at the school with much higher expectations changed her personal attitude and approach to learning.

> *I submitted work that was way beneath the level of which I was capable and she rejected this work, telling me that I could do better. At this juncture I could have done one of two things: I could have curled up in a ball and felt rejected, or I could accept her constructive criticisms and work harder to see what I could achieve. Fortunately, because of my stubborn nature, and with the support of my family, I chose the latter.* (EV)

This young lady, whose experiences were similar to those of many others reported in these studies, eventually went on to university and gained a degree in sociology. She now leads a semi-independent life and works as an advocate for others with disabilities. However, she often reflects on how much different her life could have been were it not for the interventions of a teacher whose expectations were much higher than those of most whom she encountered.

Her experiences are far from unique, as the comments of these students from Irish schools demonstrate.

> *No one expects us to do well in exams and go on to have a career or even a decent job. Changing this means challenging a mindset that sees the disability, not the person, and that fails to recognise that while it might take a young person with a disability longer to achieve their goals, we can still do it …* (HV)

I find it very patronising to be told 'you shouldn't do that because it's not for you and wouldn't suit you'. And 'we're really thinking about you, you know'. And actually it's not us that has to change. It's the environment that has to change; it's the exam system that has to change; it's the schools and the teachers that will have to re-organize themselves to allow young people with disabilities get a decent education. (NCNC)

Here we see students who not only acknowledge the difficulties of low expectation but also recognise the challenges, which need to be confronted in order to change the situation. The notion that teachers see a disability rather than the individual student or their potential is a repeated theme. There is a recognition that such an attitude is founded upon ignorance and a lack of experience of disability by the majority of teachers. Many students have a clear sense of injustice when comparing their own experiences to those of their peers:

My sister is at grammar school now and I can see the choice she gets and I realize what a bad deal I got. We're forced to go on to further education really because the education we got at school wouldn't get us a job. (NCNC)

If I got bad results in the exams it was – 'try better next time'…if anyone else got a bad result there was an 'in-depth'. (HV)

The message here can be interpreted as having a disability means that attainment or achievement doesn't matter. By contrast, some students reported positive experiences where teachers were able to see beyond the special educational need or disability and encouraged the individual to strive for higher attainment.

One teacher kept driving me the whole way. Kind of 'put it in a context, fair enough, you have a disability but – throw it away from you and continue on'. From that day on I've never looked back. (HV)

The issue of expectation is clearly one, which is influential and may impact upon the lives of young people well beyond school. Some are able to articulate an opinion with regards to how their own attitude and approach to learning may assist teachers in raising their own expectations.

Basically, I try to be as independent as I can and I don't go out of my way to, you know, make it all, you know, 'look at me, I have a hearing aid so treat me different', and I think they respect me for that as well, which is a good thing. (EV).

Access

For many young people with special educational needs gaining access to education and the physical environment of the school presents a challenge. Whilst many accept that when schools were built in the past the needs of those with disabilities were not considered, they often feel frustration that the management of existing provision in order to make life easier has been overlooked.

I had to go up four flights of stairs to get to my classroom and I had to come down before the rest. If I came down at the same time as them they'd just push; once they basically knocked me down one flight. (HV)

If I wanted to go to the toilet, the cubicles were very small; I had to go to the teachers' room. They knew and I had someone outside the door just in case they'd come. It wasn't too bad. (HV)

This last example is typical of the level of acceptance, which many students show for a situation, which affronts their dignity but has become accepted as the norm.

Whilst the physical management of the learning environment can be a genuine obstacle for some students, many express the view that positive attitudes towards management of the school can make a significant difference. In the following extract it is apparent that the school management has given some consideration to ensuring that pupils can gain access to the learning space they need.

There were girls in wheelchairs and they got round easily and everything was at a level where they could do everything. (HV)

Whilst an acceptance of the inadequacy of the physical space in which learning must take place is apparent, students are understandably less tolerant with regards to poor curriculum access. Far from being included in lessons, students can find themselves on the periphery and feeling excluded from the real processes of learning. Some students expressed the view that in lessons they could easily become passive bystanders with little engagement with those activities, which provided direct learning experiences to their peers.

In science, using things on the bench, I just sat down and watched. (HV)

At times this passivity was simply accepted by students who appear resigned to the fact that their teachers have only a limited understanding of how to involve them in learning.

Student: *The P. E. teacher let me watch. There was no discrimination.*
Researcher: *Did they include exercises suited to you?*
Student: *Oh no, no. But he was very good.*
The nearest I got was inside the hall. He could have let me referee, there's nothing wrong with my mouth. (HV)

Whilst resigned to a position of semi-involvement in many lessons, students often express their disappointment at the discriminatory nature of actions taken within schools.

They didn't make an effort to think about it when it came to trips. Most times we couldn't go.
I would listen to them when they came back – 'you missed a great couple of days we'd great fun'. Even sitting beside them hearing them laughing, it was laughing at something you didn't understand. I didn't like that. (HV)

Here we see an example of a student who in addition to being excluded from a curriculum activity expresses frustration being outside of the social aspects of the learning experience.

The inexperience of teachers in addressing the needs of young people with special educational needs or disabilities sometimes results in practice, which clearly puts the learner at a severe disadvantage. Thus, a young lady entering a further education college found herself confronting obstacles, which were not experienced by her peers.

Having discovered my dyslexia, she [the teacher] insisted that I should dictate an essay to her to prove that I could manage the written aspects of the course. This was not a requirement for any able-bodied student with dyslexia. (EV)

The lack of curriculum opportunities was often allied to low teacher expectations, which are seen by many young people as a pr-cursor to underachievement.

What is worse than the lack of subject choice, though, is the low expectations that teachers have for children and young people with disabilities. They don't expect us to do well in examinations and this can become a self-fulfilling prophesy. (NCNC)

However, there are instances where students have been provided with the kind of support, which has enabled them to participate fully in learning and to feel comfortable within school.

I don't think I should be treated any different because I have Asperger's Syndrome. At my school I would definitely get help with work such as planning and good content. My teachers want the best for me and they encourage me. I have a special Learning Support Assistant (LSA) who helps me a lot. She's very patient; I like her. When I had difficulty joining in with others in Year 7(age 11), she worked with me and taught me how to do it. Now she's confident I can do; that well so she's only working with me from time to time and on other areas. She taught me how to understand the ways in which my Asperger's will affect me in my school life. I know I've made good progress because in junior school my support worker was always beside me in class... (EV)

Isolation

Being perceived as different can lead to periods of isolation and social exclusion in schools. Friendships are often difficult to maintain and several young people with special educational needs have discussed the distance, which they feel between themselves and their peers. Isolation is sometime self inflicted as a result of an inability or lack of desire to become established within the normal school social networks. However, in some instances this isolation is based upon the ignorance of other individuals whose appreciation of the needs and experiences of a student with special educational needs is limited.

I have a very select few friends. It takes me a long time before I'd trust them with certain aspects of my life, and I think the fact that I couldn't do as much as other people meant I was excluded from going out with the class – I think they were nearly afraid I would hurt myself. (HV)

I didn't get involved in anything because I was always trying to survive. Get through school. I suppose confidence-wise I just dropped because of the general attitude. I went into a world of my own and I didn't bother. I couldn't mix with people, I couldn't. (HV)

At my last school, I was left out of a lot of activities because my friends that were all able-bodied they would go off and do their thing and leave me out and they just wouldn't really bother. I was just put to one side and that was just it for the rest of the group in the playground and stuff. (EV)

Isolation from peers is clearly a concern and one, which is likely to be addressed only through efforts to increase the awareness and understanding of all students. This requires direct intervention on the part of teachers to ensure that the achievements and abilities of young people with special educational needs and disabilities are recognised and celebrated, rather than focusing upon limitations.

Whilst negative experiences lead one to question the progress which has been made towards establishing a more inclusive education system, there are often reflective statements made by students which indicate that they remain hopeful of change.

> *It's becoming better these days. It's becoming more acceptable for people with disabilities to do things. You know, in society in general, they're treating people with disabilities more equal than it used to be.* (NCNC)

What can we learn by listening to student voices?
The extracts from interviews here presented provide insights into the experiences of students in educational settings described as inclusive. Yet the evidence suggests that moves towards locating students with special educational needs and disabilities in mainstream schools, in line with current national and international policies is in itself insufficient to ensure that they receive an inclusive educational experience. For schooling to be inclusive it must surely provide the structures and procedures which ensure that students do feel fully included in all social and educational aspects of school life.

It is, of course, easy to be critical of the schools attended by these young people and to comment upon inadequacies in the policies, and procedures adopted by teachers. However, it is clear that in many instances teachers have made considerable efforts to address the needs of individuals but fall short of success as a result of inadequate experience, training or understanding. The insights of the students quoted above can provide us with some appreciation of the challenges of inclusion directly through their experiences. Whilst schools are unlikely to set out to deliberately create isolation, low expectation or exclusion from the curriculum, it is apparent that these conditions pertain where teachers have been ill prepared and have a lack of appreciation of how to address the specific needs of individual students. The professionalism of teachers is such that the majority would certainly feel anxious and concerned with a realisation that they are not meeting the needs of individual students and would therefore wish to address this issue. Students with special needs and disabilities are uniquely situated in their ability to articulate their personal experiences of schooling. Listening to students should therefore become a part of normal classroom practice in order that teachers can achieve greater awareness of the educational experiences, which they are affording or denying to their students.

The relationship between teachers and students has often been viewed as that of a transmitter of knowledge to an acolyte. Davie and Galloway (1996) suggest that a shift in this relationship, which increases student autonomy and gives higher credence to their views and ideas, will not sit comfortably with all teachers. However, there is evidence to suggest that where student opinions are sought these can have major benefits. Munby (1995) suggests that students who are encouraged to make self assessments and to discuss the planning of their own teaching and learning become more astute with regards to the learning process and are better motivated to learn. Rose, Fletcher and Goodwin (1999) in their study of students with severe learning difficulties, provided evidence not only of increased student self-awareness when they were involved in making decisions about their learning, but also a clearer focus

upon the provision of appropriate teaching approaches on the part of teachers. Equally important is the increased awareness of the educational experiences of young people, which can be gained through listening to what students have to tell us. Where systems have been developed to enable students to influence schools through expressing their views and relating their experiences, many of the negative elements of schooling expressed by the young people cited above have been overcome or avoided. Studies indicate (Cooper 1993, Wehmeyer et al 1998, Morris 2003) that where such actions are taken, improvements in both educational and social performance are often the result.

The challenge of inclusion remains one of attempting to move beyond rhetoric to ensuring that teachers and students gain new insights into the learning process which leads to greater success and achievement. Much has been achieved through the efforts of policy makers, and teachers to ensure the development of a more equitable education system. The commitment to inclusion is undoubtedly stronger now than in the past. Yet some of what currently passes for inclusion remains tokenistic and fails to address the needs of both learners and those who teach them. Teachers need support through well planned professional development and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding which will enable them to become more effective in meeting the needs of all learners. Whilst seeking the opinions of students will not provide all of the answers to the challenges ahead, a failure to do so is likely to retard the progress which might otherwise be made.

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