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Perceptions of Support for Pupils with Special Educational Needs: Two Case Studies

Key findings from several research studies have documented the notion of including "pupil voice" in the discourse around pupil teacher relationships and the experiences of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in schools. The current article contains extracts from case studies of two children with SEN and their parents who participated in a series of interviews in special and mainstream schools. The primary aim of the research was to examine pupil experiences in schools with a particular focus on their perceptions and interpretations of the support they received from their teachers. Each of the two case studies presented contrasts the pupils' experience and emphasises the complexity of pupil-teacher relationships and how individual needs may be accommodated by teachers and schools. Both pupils have been assigned a pseudonym.

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INTRODUCTION

Pupils arrive to schools with certain expectations both of themselves and their teachers. This is reciprocated by teachers who also have expectations of and for their students. These expectations, however, may be unintentionally influenced when pupils are accompanied by a label which may or may not work to their advantage. The notion of a 'label' accompanying a pupil, and how it is perceived by teachers, does not impact on expectations in isolation but can be seen to be dependent upon a number of variables. These include the school climate, in particular the establishment of inclusive practices (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou, 2010), the level of teacher skill in managing pupils with special educational needs (SEN) (Scanlon and McGilloway, 2006) and the 'label' or, in more specific terms, the type of disability with which the pupil presents (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). However research has established that once a pupil has acquired a certain type of reputation from an early age they are still perceived as being 'labelled' in a persistent way throughout their school years

(MacLure, Jones, Holmes and MacRae, 2011). The negativity associated with 'labelling' children with disabilities can be found to be related to the historical context of disability (Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). Labels can lead to assumptions about the capabilities and capacities of children to learn and operates from the notion of a child's weaknesses as opposed to their strengths. Consequently, children in many cases are seen to be defined by their label and not their individual characteristics.

THE NECESSITY OF ASSESSMENT

It is widely acknowledged that early identification and assessment of a child's educational and psychological needs is critical to avoid long-term adverse educational outcomes and disengagement (Armstrong et al., 2010; Frederickson and Cline, 2010; Griffin and Shevlin, 2007). However, distinctions can be made between disabilities that will present a child with lifelong difficulties (i.e. physical disabilities, visual and hearing impairments) that are apparent from birth as opposed to those that can be seen to be school-related problems that emerge upon entry into formal education that are generally observed and identified by the classroom teacher (Frederickson and Cline). Within the Irish context, legislative changes have dictated that a system of assessment be established in order to identify the specific and individual needs of students with SEN if they are to achieve their potential in mainstream education (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2005). However, in many cases children have to operate within a 'wait to fail model' and experience failure before assistance comes to the fore (Frederickson and Cline).

The social model of disability suggests that disability evolves as a result of societal inadequacies to facilitate those who are different through the actual construction and organisation of society (Oliver, 1996). Accordingly, in order for pupils with SEN to access resources and support to enable them to be effectively included in mainstream schools, they have to establish that they indeed have such needs which have arisen as a result of varying levels of challenges and difficulties which they have already encountered in their educational experience (Armstrong et al., 2010). The purpose of assessment is to establish the presence or absence of cognitive, sensory, social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties which in turn determines the nature of supports required. Therefore, in practical terms, the 'label' entitles pupils to support and resources to enable them to access the full curriculum, develop social and emotional competencies and experience a sense of well-being within the school context. This provision is delivered in conjunction with the Department of Education and Skills and is administered through the

General Allocation Model (DES, 2005) where distinctions are made between 'high' and 'low' incidence disabilities and where provision of resources is clearly linked to a specific category of disability. However, if a pupil cannot be categorised under a specific disability they do not qualify for support.

Further complexity within the issue of inclusion arises with regard to the notion of human rights and the rights of pupils with SEN. For example, despite Ireland's ratification in 1992 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), there has been little progress on moving this rights based agenda into a cohesive legislative structure. However, it is noted that some commitment to the rights of children has taken place, namely the launch of the National Children's Strategy (Flynn, Shevlin and Lodge, 2011) and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (Ireland, 2004). The EPSEN Act, which is yet to be fully enacted, specifically sets out the rights of pupils with SEN to be educated alongside their peers who do not have such needs. How this actually translates into practice across all educational institutions is dependent upon the policies and practices in individual schools. However, at a more critical level it must be acknowledged that the development of 'best practice' is currently 'on hold' due to the current economic climate which dictates the amount of resources the Department of Education and Skills can distribute to schools to facilitate pupils with SEN. Accordingly, at a fundamental level the experiences of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools can be seen to be dictated by the policies and procedures established by school boards of management. These boards maintain and have the primary responsibility for creating an inclusive school and for imparting and promoting these practices amongst their school staff (Meaney, Monaghan and Kiernan, 2006). Consequently, there is potentially a huge disparity between schools as regards the successful inclusion of students with SEN

EXPECTATIONS

Several theoretical models have attempted to address the processes by which teachers' expectations are communicated to students (Cooper, 1979; Cooper and Good, 1983). These models developed as result of a seminal study *"Pygmalion in the Classroom"* (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) which concluded that the expectations teachers had for student performance influenced their achievement. Expectations can be defined within three broad areas: (1) estimates of present ability or achievement require teachers to assess the pupil's current ability and not make predictions about future performance (2) expected improvement reflects the prediction of the teacher's belief regarding the academic progress of the pupil

across a specific time period and (3) a teacher's estimate of a pupil's ability is reflective of a pupil's standardised test score (Cooper). These expectations then impact and result in two kinds of effects on pupil performance. Firstly, the self-fulfilling prophecy, which leads to a pupil displaying behaviours that were originally expected and sustaining expectation effects which occur as a result of a pupil making improvements which are not taken into account by the teacher's expectations (Cooper and Good). Secondly, the students' academic gains are not recognised by the teacher.

Consequently, teachers' expectations influence (either consciously or unconsciously) overt and covert behaviour, which in turn are communicated to students and ultimately affects academic self-efficacy and/or performance. Because self-efficacy appears to be a comparative process against which the self is compared to others, teachers' attitudes appear to influence self-efficacy by enabling the learners to appraise differential teacher behaviours that indicate high versus low achievement (Fredrick, Deitz, Bryceland and Hummel, 2000). Achievement, however, in this context is likely not to be restricted to academic matters, but also incorporates teachers' reactions to other matters, such as students' socialisation and personality (Weinstein, 2002). Bekle (2004) reported that teachers respond differentially to pupils with SEN (relative to their peers without SEN) by demanding less, calling upon them less frequently, praising them less and criticising them more. Earlier observations by Rosenthal (1974) concluded that teachers respond to bright students by creating a warmer socio-emotional atmosphere; engage them in more verbal public exchanges versus private exchanges with less able students; do not sustain their engagement with students who are less likely to give the correct answer and give poor feedback. Based on these findings, Cooper (1979) developed the *"Expectation Communication Model"* and argued that teachers feel they have more control over high achieving rather than low achieving pupils. This control effectively translates and influences their decisions on how they interact with their pupils which results in the creation of pupils' self-concept, efficacy and control over their own motivation in the classroom. Research into teachers' attitudes has also indicated that these are influenced primarily by their perceptions of their own skills which are in turn influenced by levels of appropriate resources (Butler and Shevlin, 2001). However, school teachers and teachers in initial teacher education, have reported that they feel ill-equipped in managing pupils with SEN effectively because of inadequate support (Scanlon and McGilloway, 2006) and lack of training during initial teacher education (Lambe and Bones, 2006). When teachers' expectations of their pupils are not met it is generally assumed that the causes can be attributed to "within child variables" and not teacher behaviour or

attitudes (Cefai and Cooper, 2010). These assumptions, regardless of enquiry, may result in some pupils moving to an alternative school where the new school climate may accommodate their needs and in some cases effectively lead pupils with SEN to experience multiple transitions throughout their education.

METHODOLOGY

This study, set in mainstream and special schools, described the perceptions of pupils with SEN and their parents in regard to their experiences of teacher and school support in relation to their disability. Participants (n= 8) were recruited with parental consent and pupil assent through two urban special schools and three urban primary schools. A series of one-to-one interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed through content analysis. For the purposes of this article, two case studies were chosen to highlight the individual perceptions of support received by two pupils, one attending a special school and one attending a mainstream school and to compare and contrast their educational experiences.

CASE STUDY 1: EXPERIENCING MULTIPLE TRANSITIONS

Case Study 1 provides an overview of one pupil's experience in two mainstream schools before she finally moved to a special school. Patricia (pseudonym) was a female pupil with a diagnosis of mild general learning disability, and was attending a special primary school.

Patricia was extremely happy in her current primary school, but was also really looking forward to moving into post-primary school (special). However, she was somewhat surprised by the latter sentiment because of her experience in other (mainstream) primary schools before coming to her current (special) school and was adamant that she would not stay at any school that resembled any of those which she had left:

> *Yeah... yeah like I'm happy now. But if you had asked me at my last school or the one before that I would have said no... em no...I was not happy there at all.*

She particularly accounted for these changes in school by the fact that her peers had repeatedly bullied and ridiculed her because of her disability. She also felt that when things went wrong in those schools she inevitably got blamed and received very little support from teachers or principals:

...in my last school the teachers...they hated me and I hated them and if anything happened I got the blame and I didn't even do anything and me ma was always up to the school and I was always getting into trouble.

The sense of powerlessness was clearly articulated by Patricia who stated, "What really made me mad and sad was that nobody listened to me in them schools, they asked me if I had done it and even when I would say no they didn't believe me". As a result, she reported that the move to her current special school "came as a big relief" to her. She found the teachers there helpful and caring and had begun to relax and enjoy school:

...yeah like they help you when you don't understand something and you are not afraid to ask them questions...I like Miss and she helps you even if you are upset over something like not getting on with the girls or something and she listens to me and helps me sort things out.

She reported that she had also made friends for the first time:

I have friends now...like here in the school. I don't see them outside or anything cause my other friends at home they go to a different school but I have somebody to hang out with.

Patricia's class teacher was acutely aware of her previous difficulties with bullying and she had organised transition activities, which she believed would address any anxieties that Patricia might have had in this regard about the transition to the special school:

Before I started here Miss would let me come in...like not for the whole day and I got to know some of the others and they were happy too because there was another girl starting so when I started it wasn't too bad cause I knew their names and that.

Patricia reported that she had little or no concerns in her current school except that she still found the work hard but acknowledged that teachers helped her to try and understand what she found difficult.

Contrary to some of Patricia's sentiments, her mother reported that she had struggled with her daughter's move to a special school because she did not want her labelled but acknowledged that the previous situation was simply not working. However, she felt overall that it was in the child's best interests and she noted that

Patricia was much happier and easier to manage at home since the move. Patricia's mother reported that she was pleased with her daughter's progress, and she indicated that homework was a potential source of conflict between mother and daughter because the former wanted her daughter to work more independently, whereas Patricia firmly believed that she still needed assistance. Patricia, in fact, confirmed that she did find it difficult to work independently, but that she was doing her best to please everyone and was "trying her hardest". In the meantime, she was looking forward to organising the Christmas party and was on the committee which organised the presents. She no longer missed going to the same school as her friends from home and is very happy in her new school.

In summary, it is apparent that central to Patricia's previous school experience was the key relationship between herself, her teachers and her peers resulting in isolation and inadequate support. These particular types of relationships will be explored in conjunction with the second case study.

CASE STUDY 2: STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE

Mark (pseudonym) was a male pupil with a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) who had transferred from a primary school to a mainstream post-primary school. Mark was acutely aware that he would have to try and stay out of 'trouble'. He reported that he had been in 'trouble' several times during sixth class and he believed that this was the result of his short temper and tendency to fly off the handle easily. However, rather than react negatively to his difficulties, his class teacher and principal made specific efforts to help Mark overcome them. His school teachers reported that he was a bright young man who experienced difficulties as result of having ADHD, which in turn impacted on his ability to concentrate and apply himself to academic tasks. After consulting with Mark and his mother on how the school might help him improve, the school set up training for him and other pupils on a computer based programme aimed at improving and sustaining concentration levels for pupils who experience such difficulties. Mark proudly reported that he had the highest score in the class:

> *It's a really cool game and you have to work out a lot of things so you are learning all the time even though it doesn't seem like that because if you don't remember the stuff you won't get to the next level.*

The school also set up rugby coaching for all the pupils, the primary aim of which was to get Mark and other pupils like him involved in team sports where body contact was inevitable and where players are taught to react in a positive manner

as opposed to sudden impulses. As a result, Mark reported that he was very happy in his school, he liked his teachers and his peers but was aware that this might change in his new post-primary school. Staying out of 'trouble' was also a core concern for Mark's mother who hoped that he would stay in school long enough to get his exams.

Despite his difficulties Mark managed to settle in his new class but he was still worried about getting a reputation for being "bold":

> *You have to learn to stay out of trouble and keep your head down but sometimes the other fellas rile me and I can't help myself especially when they say some stuff, I know I should just walk away and they know I won't.*

However, Mark's year head noticed that he was having some difficulty with some of his peers and offered to help:

> *There were a load of lads picking on me all the time and I kept getting into fights...and Mr X was really good and he said...listen Mark if you are having problems or somebody is annoying you try and not strike back but just come looking for me and I can help you sort it out...but I thought he meant tell on them and I wouldn't do that but he said no it was just to give me time to calm down and that.*

This initiative on behalf of the school was welcomed by both Mark and his mother and she reported that he seemed to be very happy and was getting along well. Mark particularly noted, "Yeah its good here and I'm not getting into trouble as much as I was at the beginning because Mr X keeps an eye on me".

His mother reported that she had heard no reports about mis-behaviour and she received occasional phone calls from the year head to update her on Mark's academic and social progress. The year head initiative also encouraged Mark to participate in trials for the school GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association] team for which he had been selected:

> *Yeah I like it...I didn't think I would but Mr X said give it a try and I did and I got on the team and I was real surprised but it's good and I have made new friends and I'm not bothered as much with them other fellas like before...but if they start at me again...well if they do I guess I will talk it over with Mr. X.*

Mark's comments indicate that he was generally positive about teachers and worried less now about breaking the rules. He had concluded that "once you knew what a teacher wanted, then you would be ok". He had made a lot of new friends and he was enjoying this immensely. Of particular importance to him was the fact that he had not got into too much trouble and reported that this was the way he wanted it to stay.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, schools have specific duties with regard to pupils with SEN under the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004), the most notable of which is to provide education in an inclusive environment. In addition, they are obliged to notify teachers of the nature of their pupils' SEN, ensure that teachers are aware of the importance of identifying pupils with SEN and promote awareness amongst the pupil body of the needs of pupils with disabilities (Armstrong et al., 2010). Given that pupils with SEN experience more rejection by their peers (Tur-Kaspa, 2002) and higher levels of bullying (Carter and Spencer, 2006) it is not surprising that these particular themes emerged from the two case studies detailed above. However, what is different is how the pupils' needs were addressed by their respective schools and the differences in the experiences of the pupils as a result of one school's disengagement from the problem and another school's initiative to support their pupil. What then can account for the differences in the two approaches?

O'Brien's (2000) view of an educational curriculum is worth considering:

> *The educational curriculum comprises all intended and unintended learning experiences that take place in and through the school, thus enabling all learners to manipulate information and knowledge, to understand their emotional needs and to develop their own sense of consciousness, in short, it contributes to how a learner constructs a notion of self* (p. 10).

Building on this notion of how the curriculum can shape school experiences, the EPSEN Act (Ireland, 2004) espouses equipping children with SEN with the level of skills necessary for them to participate to their best of their ability in the activities of society, living independent and fulfilled lives (Meaney et al., 2006). The key variable identified in the current study that contributed to the pupils' positive and negative experiences was teacher-pupil relations. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that an educational programme will only be successful if it takes account of the full range of a child's strengths and needs across all dimensions of development (Frederickson and Cline, 2010). This becomes even

more important for pupils with SEN, but it is also crucially dependent upon the assumption that teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to allow them to work effectively with all pupils. If teacher-pupil relationships are a key variable in school experiences for pupils with SEN, then those relationships need to take account of pupils' views.

While it is generally acknowledged that these relationships should be built on positive communication, trust and respect (Rose and Shevlin, 2010), this can only happen if teachers develop an awareness of the challenges that pupils with SEN experience in both academic and social domains (Scanlon, Barnes-Holmes and Lodge, in press) and where teachers in turn are supported by an ethos that promotes real dialogue between all parties concerned. In order to effect change, a system of communication and support for both parties needs to be established which ultimately will inform and support teachers on how they might best listen to and incorporate the views of pupils with SEN into their teaching practice and help them to achieve what is, after all, their entitlement to participate fully in society.

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