A Sense of Belonging:
Childrens' Views of Acceptance
in "Inclusive" Mainstream Schools

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Abstract

In recent years, international initiatives such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) have encouraged educational researchers to focus their attentions on those conditions that enable schools to become more inclusive. Much of this research has focused upon teacher attitudes and expectations (Unianu, 2012), the development of inclusive pedagogical approaches (Florian & Black Hawkins, 2011), and aspects of assessment and classroom management (Erickson & Davis, 2015). Less attention has been given to the experiences of children with special educational needs as learners in mainstream classrooms.

In this paper, drawing upon data from interviews conducted with children during a four year longitudinal study, (Project Iris - Inclusive Research in Irish Schools), we consider the relationship between acceptance and belonging as critical factors in defining what it means to be included in school. In addition to presenting data from children in 24 schools across Ireland, we will discuss the challenges of undertaking fair analysis that ensures that the researchers' interpretation of pupil voices can be seen as trustworthy and informed. The paper concludes with a discussion of the principles that might inform the ways in which researchers can work with children in order to ensure them fair representation in research that investigates critical aspects of their lives.

Introduction

Research into the efficacy of providing a more equitable approach to education has been reported from many European countries over the past twenty five years (Meijer, 2003; Meijer, Soriano & Watkins, 2007). Whilst the promotion of inclusive education has received significant attention from researchers, much of this has been narrowly focused upon an understanding teacher attitudes and expectations (de Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011; Unianu 2012), approaches to assessment and teaching (Engh & Rose, 2014; Florian & Black Hawkins, 2011), and classroom management (Erickson and Davis 2015; Soodak, 2003). Less attention has been given to the experiences of children with special educational needs as learners in mainstream classrooms. The commissioning of a four year longitudinal study, (Project IRIS - Inclusive Research in Irish Schools) by the National Council for Special Educational Needs in Ireland, sought to gain data related to the provision made for pupils with special educational needs in Irish schools, their social and educational experiences and the outcomes of interventions in relation to their learning.

As part of the data collection process for this investigation, researchers interviewed pupils with a wide range of special educational needs and disabilities in order to ascertain their experiences of schooling. As the education system in Ireland moves to become more inclusive, teachers and other professionals have begun to make curriculum adjustments and changes to procedures in order to accommodate a greater diversity of learning needs. Many of the initiatives deployed have been reported in academic publications, but the voices of children have seldom been brought to the forefront of data gathered in these papers. Whilst collecting data for Project IRIS, researchers were briefed to give attention to the experiences and opinions of pupils with special educational needs and to consider these alongside data collected from other sources. It was important for both the researchers and the funders of the research to gain an impression of how pupils with special educational needs perceived that they were accepted by their peers and others, and the extent to which they felt that they belonged in a mainstream learning environment. Acceptance and belonging are two closely associated concepts which impact greatly upon each other. Crouch, Keys and McMahon (2014), suggest that children with special educational needs or disabilities feel accepted on the basis of their experiences of positive interaction with others. Where they perceive themselves to be respected and treated in similar ways to their peers, they are more likely to feel that they are accepted as part of a group and belong within the same environment as others who flourish in this situation.

Baumeister and Leary (1995), described belonging as a fundamental human need which when positive assists the individual to function effectively and to feel motivated to be part of a community. The creation of an environment in which children feel that they are accepted is therefore critical to their inclusion and the development of a sense of belonging in a specific school context. This paper therefore draws upon interview data collated from interviews with pupils in Irish schools and discusses what we have learned about their everyday experiences of schools, their beliefs about their sense of belonging and how this relates to the provision of a more inclusive education environment.

Listening to Children's Voices in Research

Narrative approaches to investigation have been used by researchers who have been keen to access the authentic voices of the subjects of their research (Elliott, 2005; Webster & Mertova, 2007). In recognising that individuals are often best positioned to both tell us about their experiences and to assist us in interpreting their world, researchers have the opportunity

to place the subjects of their research at the heart of the process. However, whilst it is evident that far more educational researchers are now making efforts to engage children and young people in the research process, undoubtedly with an intention to demonstrate that their views are valued, it should not be assumed that this is an easy process. We would suggest that prior to embarking upon research that intends to involve children through interviews or other means, it is important to consider how the authenticity of data will be assured through adopting approaches and principles that enable the experiences of the subjects of research to be fairly represented.

There are undoubted challenges in attempting to engage children in the research process. Hill (2006) suggests that for most children their understanding of the purpose of research may be limited, and even when researchers endeavour to involve them and to treat their opinions with respect, this may have significant limitations. Children may be willing to share their information with researchers, but the extent to which they fully understand the reasons that their opinions and experiences are being sought may be limited. In instances where the interviewee has a learning difficulty, this may exacerbate the problem and unless the researchers exhibit some caution the data obtained may be seriously flawed.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations General Assembly, 1989) and in particular Article 12, affirms that all children have an entitlement to express their views on matters affecting them. This is an important principle and one that has certainly influenced the behaviour of many researchers, including ourselves over a number of years (Rose & Shevlin 2010; Shevlin & Rose 2008). In the research discussed within this paper we endeavoured to gain some understanding of the provision made for children with special educational needs in Irish schools, and their experiences of accessing this. As a matter of principle it was decided from the outset of the research that we would therefore make a commitment to hear the voices of children as a central part of the data collection process for the study. However, we were also aware of the many challenges that exist in providing opportunities for fair representation of children's voices, and in particular the need to be judicious in our interpretation of what they had to tell us.

Some commentators have urged caution when efforts are made to gain interview data from children with special educational needs. Felce (2002) expresses a concern that researchers almost feel obliged to seek the views of children and can be driven to adopt tokenistic methods that serve little purpose other than to salve the conscience of well-meaning adults. This is a legitimate concern and one that demands the attention of researchers who would clearly wish to avoid this situation.

Efforts to identify the means through which young people can be meaningfully engaged in the research process have been discussed by a number of writers (Lewis & Lindsay, 1999; Punch, 2002). In an effort to establish guidelines that might inform the work of researchers who wish to access and interpret the voices of young people with learning disabilities, Lewis and Porter (2004), considered the practices that might be adopted at each stage of the research process. They suggest that researchers should begin with an interrogation of the research aims and ask four key questions, these being:

1. How will the research be useful? How will it contribute to the lives of people with learning disabilities?
2. Will the research bring about change?
3. Have people with learning disabilities contributed to establishing the aims and purpose of the research?
4. Could research participants be harmed in any way through involvement?
(Lewis & Porter, 2004, p.191.)

By asking these initial questions researchers are more likely to make informed decisions about the conduct of their investigation. We would contend that if the proposed research does not serve the purpose of enhancing the lives of children, and is unlikely to support initiatives for change, then our very raison d'etre for undertaking research in the area of inclusive education is called into question. The justification of any research conducted in this area must surely be an intention to gain knowledge and understanding that may inform practice and contribute to improvements in the lives of children and their families and teachers.

Lewis and Porter develop the theme of responsible research further when they consider the practices which are necessary to protect both vulnerable young people and the integrity of data. A further four questions asked by these authors are focused upon the process of data collection and asks:

1. Who will support location and access to participants?
2. What are the potential synergy, contrasts and conflicts when there is multi agency involvement?
3. What control is there over, and checks on, the actions of intermediaries?
4. Are facilitators or proxies in a position to represent participants' views?
   (Lewis & Porter, 2004, p.193.)

The provision of support from a known adult is essential for many young people with special educational needs and equally important in enabling researchers to gain access and interpret what they are hearing. The power imbalance between researchers and the subjects of research has been discussed at length (Aluwihare-Samaranayake 2015; Robinson & Taylor 2013), and may be greater than usual when a child or young person has a special educational need that causes them some difficulties with communication. However, the choice of an appropriate individual to support a child may not always be straightforward. Where the researchers require an adult to act as an intermediary or interpreter for a child, there needs to be safeguards to ensure that the opinions of the child and not the interpreter are given prominence. This requires an effort on the part of the researchers to verify data through triangulation and by checking transcripts of interviews or focus groups against other sources of data. The guidelines produced by Lewis and Porter may serve both researchers and the subjects of research well, but only when significant efforts are made to incorporate these guidelines in everyday research practice.

Methods

As would be expected of a longitudinal study conducted over a four year period, researchers working on Project IRIS established a large data set. This was compiled on the basis of interviews and focus groups completed with service users (parents and pupils) and providers (teachers, principals, therapeutic professionals, psychologists and representatives of special interest groups), a national survey of schools, scrutiny of documentation, classroom observations and a review of literature (Rose, Shevlin, Winter & O'Raw, 2010). The data set as a whole is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Data set for longitudinal study.*

Total Date Set Combined Primary, Post-primary and special schools	N=
Interviews	943
Documents	1151
Observations	134
Photographs/pictures scrutinised	260
Videos scrutinised	9
School websites	27
Total data set	**2524**

A total of 120 semi-structured interviews were conducted with children who had been assessed as having special educational needs. The children attended primary schools (N=10), post-primary schools (N=10) and special schools (N=4) from a representative sample drawn from across the Republic of Ireland. A sampling frame ensured that representation was obtained from pupils who attended the full range of Irish schools which included national schools (Roman Catholic), Church of Ireland Schools (Protestant), Educate Together (multi-denominational), Gaelscoileanna (Irish medium schools), secondary schools (mainly managed by religious organisations), secondary vocational schools, secondary community schools, special schools, single sex and mixed sex schools. In addition, the sample ensured representation from urban and rural areas and from a range of socio-economic situations. The pupil sample for interview was selected with the assistance of school principals and resource teachers and ensured representation of all categories of special educational needs identified within the Department of Education and Skills framework for assessment (National Council for Special Educational Needs 2013).

Interviewers met with children in their schools on two occasions during the research with a two year period between each interview and in the presence of a known adult. Informed consent was obtained from parents/carers and also from the individual children. This enabled the researchers to consider changes in the lives of the interviewees during this period and to reflect upon those influences that might have led to these changes. Explanations of the purpose of the research and the intended use of data were given in both written and oral form. In some instances the use of augmentative forms of communication ensured that children could gain access to and participate fully in the interview process. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 15 minutes to half an hour.

A standard interview protocol was used for all interviews which were audio recorded and transcribed. The protocol contained a standard set of questions to ensure that comparison could be made across the sample, but with the flexibility provided to probe and prompt in order to elicit responses and ensure that each interviewee was able to respond on the basis of their personal experiences. Transcripts were subjected to categorical coding with codes being reduced to themes after a process of lean coding (Creswell, 2008).

Identical codes were used across all data including those derived from interviews, observations and scrutiny of documentation. This process involved two researchers coding independently and coming together to compare and verify codes thus increasing the trustworthiness of the data (Rose & Shevlin, 2014) Themes derived from the interview

transcripts were organised within the four broader areas of policy, provision, experience and outcomes that informed the reporting of the research as a whole. However, for the purpose of this paper, only transcript data that informs us about the educational experiences of children with special educational needs is being reported. The distribution of interviews across the phases of schooling was as presented in Table 2. As a matter of principle, all voices from interviews were transcribed verbatim with no attempts made to change English expression or presentation. This was seen as important in ensuring that the authenticity of pupils' voices was maintained.

Table 2: *Distribution of interviews*

School Type	N=
Primary	52
Post-primary	48
Special	20
Total	**120**

The trustworthiness of the data secured was achieved through triangulation with that obtained through other data collection methods during field visits. Classroom observation was used to verify the experiences of individuals and to cross reference what was seen with data gained during interviews. A similar process of cross referencing across interview data with parents, teachers, special needs assistants and pupil peers enabled the research team to establish the trustworthiness of the data. Whenever this verification was not possible data was not used in the reporting of research findings in an effort to ensure the veracity of reporting. In this way, it was possible to ensure that the interview data used in reporting the views of respondents in this paper provided a fair reflection on the experiences of the individuals involved.

What We Have Learned

At primary school level pupils generally felt very well supported by both teachers and support staff. They recognised that there were times when they experienced difficulties with learning and were generally confident in seeking help. Pupils interviewed often commented on their ability to seek assistance directly from class teachers and found them to be supportive and understanding. They sometimes recognised that even with initial support they might have difficulties with understanding the tasks in hand, but suggested that they could always return to the teacher for additional help. The comments from these two pupils were typical of what was heard during interviews.

> *"I go to teacher and ask her. And then if I looked at it really really hard for a few minutes, I probably would be able to figure it out, but sometimes if I didn't, I'd go up to teacher and I ask her to help me figure it out."* (Primary school pupil with dyslexia)

> *"I just go up to the teacher, and she says, 'you just have to do*
> *this and that', and then I go back and sometimes I can't*
> *understand it, and then I just go back up and then I understand*
> *it the next time."* (Primary school pupil with specific speech and
> language disorder)

Several pupils acknowledged that teachers recognised the need to explain new concepts in some detail in order to ensure that their pupils were able to complete activities. The following pupil commented several times on the concerns that her teacher had to ensure that she was able to fully access the lesson.

> *"And then she'd like, before we do it, she'd just like, she wouldn't*
> *just go on, she'd explain what it is so we'd understand it. It's not*
> *like she's going to go on without explaining it."* (Primary school
> pupil with autism spectrum disorder)

Pupils were asked how they felt about needing extra help. Most did not see any difficulties with this and suggested that at various times all pupils in the class might require some extra assistance. Occasionally they would comment that they were conscious of the fact that they were struggling in lessons, but when they reflected on the help provided could certainly see the advantages of having the confidence to seek assistance:

> *"Well, I'm sometimes when I get help, I feel that I don't know that*
> *much, but then when I do know it and like have to remember it,*
> *and then I'm like, that's it!"* (Primary school pupil with autism
> spectrum disorder)

Out of Class Support

In the majority of primary schools in Ireland a system whereby resource rooms, manned by specialist teachers is provided to which children can be withdrawn in small groups for additional support (Irish National Teachers' Organization, 2003; Travers, 2006). Whilst this may have some disadvantages in taking children away from the main lessons for short periods of time, possibly resulting in them missing out on important lesson content, it was an approach that was generally favoured by most pupils.

> *"I think it's good the way we get to go out and get extra help*
> *with a different teacher."* (Pupil with dyslexia in primary school)

> *"Well it helps me sometimes if I'm behind in stuff, I bring in my*
> *maths or something like that to the resource teacher, and so I get*
> *an half an hour extra there."* (Primary school pupil with autism
> spectrum disorder)

> *"I go out for English and someone said to me that 'oh you go out*
> *for extra help, you always get everything wrong'. And then one*
> *day someone said that to me and I came back to the classroom –*
> *like we were filling in the blanks the same as the girls, and the*

> *girl that said that to me got three wrong and I got all of them*
> *right."* (Primary school pupil with dyslexia)

In the post primary schools pupils were reflective about the way in which such support was provided and many saw some benefit in being in a smaller group for part of the time.

> *"Putting me into smaller classes so I can like, get it, talk about*
> *problems better and that. And it's not like it's crowded and you can*
> *get help easier if you are stuck on something."* (Student Post-
> Primary School)

In some instances decisions had been made to provide additional support for pupils in some subjects whilst removing them from a different area. Typically we saw pupils being removed from Irish lessons (Irish is a compulsory subject in primary and post-primary schools, though English is the dominant language within the country). Teachers informed us that this was sometimes a difficult decision but that parents were generally happier seeing their child missing Irish lessons than they would be seeing them removed from other subjects. The following pupil perceived this move to be advantageous.

> *"they just set up learning support for me because I don't do Irish.*
> *And I am in learning support at the moment because I don't do*
> *Irish and it really helps me because teachers do revision with*
> *maths and English and history and geography."* (Student Post-
> Primary School).

The positive attitudes of support teachers working in these withdrawn situations was commented on by a number of pupils.

> *"They* [support teachers] *just praise me if anything I do, like if I*
> *do anything or I don't get on well, they say it's alright. That gives*
> *me back my confidence. Again, praise me, because if I do*
> *anything wrong or something they don't just be like, 'oh, you're*
> *always getting it wrong.' They just say, 'this is one small part*
> *here that you have got wrong, don't worry about it.' So that*
> *helps."* (Post-primary pupil with social, emotional and
> behavioural difficulties).

Para-Professional Support

Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are provided for some pupils who have an assessment of special educational needs. These paraprofessional staff are appointed to provide care support for pupils, though throughout the research they were seen to provide important curriculum access and learning support for individuals. Despite being beyond the prescribed remit of these professional colleagues, their intervention role in enabling pupils to gain curriculum access was evident throughout the research and confirmed the views of other researchers (Lawlor, 2003; Logan, 2006) that they perform an essential function in enabling pupils to be included in lessons. The support that they provide was generally recognised by pupils as being essential to their learning:

> *"Like, if I was stuck on something and the teacher was talking to somebody else, I'd call over the SNA and she would help me. And she would also look at the work beforehand in case there was anything wrong, and we'll go over and fix it."* (Primary school pupil with mild general learning difficulties)

> *"I have an SNA, that definitely helps, specially in like the big class, you know. Because, like you could just ask the SNA like, instead of always asking the teacher."* (Post-primary Pupil with social emotional and behavioural difficulties)

A positive indication of the role of the school in increasing pupil independence was typified by comments such as:

> *"When I was in first year I needed her (SNA) a lot more than I do today. I needed her in most classes and in second year I only needed her in less classes. Today she's only in one or two of my classes because she knows that because |I don't need her as much anymore she goes and spends time in other classes"* (Post-Primary pupil with Asperger's syndrome)

Transition

Periods of transition have often been seen as difficult for young people with special educational needs. In reported research students expressed concerns about getting lost in larger school buildings, not being able to cope with increased workload, and contact with older pupils (Hughes., Banks & Terras, 2013; Maras & Aveling, 2006; Mizelle, 1999). These concerns have been reiterated in studies from Ireland where it has been suggested that some pupils and in particular those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, or others on the autism spectrum may have significant difficulties adjusting to change (Kelly & Farrell, 2012; McCauley, 2009). During the course of the research several pupils made the move from primary to post primary schools, and it was evident that considerable efforts had been made to ensure that this transition was handled sensitively. This was reflected in the comments made by pupils who recalled their initial apprehensions but felt that these were allayed by the procedures put in place by school staff.

> *"I thought it* [moving to post-primary school] *would be really hard. But it's not, it's quite good and easy."* (Post-Primary Pupil with dyslexia)

> *"Well I thought it was going to be way more scary* [moving to post-primary school], *but it's not as scary as you think. Like, you'd be more afraid of harder work, but it's actually not that much harder."* (Post-Primary Pupil with dyslexia)

General Reflections on School Life

The data collected over a four year period for this study gave a largely positive overview of the endeavours to provide a more inclusive education system in Ireland. The views of professionals and parents provided insights into their perceptions of recent changes to provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities that indicated significant progress towards creating more inclusive and equitable approaches to teaching and learning. However, we would suggest that it is the opinions of the pupils in the schools that afford us the greatest reason to be optimistic about the direction of travel for education in the country. The comments below collected from pupils in schools were similar to those provided by many of their peers:

> *"I love the subjects and I love the school and I love the helpers because they help me."* (Post-primary pupil with moderate general learning difficulties).

> *"It* [the school] *is very good. Teachers are very nice to me. I learn a lot in school and yes, basically I'm doing fine in school and it's going good for me."* (Post-primary pupil with a physical disability).

> *"The school helps with, I suppose, your education, that you are finding everything ok and that you are not on top of things and, you know, you can get help like if you want help with that, and you can minimise your subjects if you are finding it hard, or if you need a study plan. You get the career guidance and they'll talk to you if you are finding it hard. And they walk through step by step what you can do at home and stuff like that.* (Post-primary pupil with mild general learning difficulties).

Discussion

It has been suggested that a lack of empirical evidence which might inform our understanding of the development and efficacy of inclusive education in Ireland, as elsewhere, is an obstacle to both policy makers who wish to develop supportive school systems, and teachers who are attempting to provide appropriate learning opportunities for pupils with special educational needs (Hardiman, Guerin & Fitzsimons, 2009; MacGiolla Phádraig, 2007). We would concur with the notion that greater consideration should be given to research that is focused upon the experiences of those most involved in the processes of school change that are taking place in Ireland as elsewhere in the world.

Children can make a significant contribution to our understanding of their life experiences. By encouraging the students to narrate their experiences of school life researchers have an opportunity to gain rich data that can inform an understanding of the education provided to them. During this longitudinal study of provision in Ireland we were able to gain insights into schools from a wide range of sources. The experiences of teachers, parents, therapists and para-professionals informed our understanding of both the provision made for children with a range of disabilities and special educational needs, and the impact that this had upon the lives of those who support the, However, the voices of children provided personal accounts of their day to day experiences of school and their feelings about

the support they were afforded. We would suggest that children with special educational needs in this study expressed feelings of acceptance as a result of the support with which they are provided which enabled them to participate fully in all aspects of school life. Their sense of belonging was founded upon positive relationships with both their peers and the adults in their school life, and the extent to which they felt they could define and manage the levels of support that they received.

Whilst researchers need to exercise a degree of caution when interpreting data collected through interviews with children, they should also recognise that in investigations focused upon their educational experiences, they have much to say. A principled approach to interviewing children and making use of their voices is essential and we continue to learn from our experiences about the many opportunities and potential pitfalls that are inherent in this approach. A commitment to people first principles which take all necessary precautions to ensure the comfort and well-being of individuals must be paramount when undertaking research of this nature, This inevitably means that there are times when it is necessary to abandon interviews or discard data at times if children appear uncomfortable or wish not to share their opinions, experiences or feelings. Pursuit of rich data must never be prioritised over the well-being of the individual and this is especially true when working with children or vulnerable people.

The data obtained from children through the Project IRIS field work contributed significantly to our understanding of the ways in which efforts to promote a more inclusive education system in Ireland is impacting upon schools, children and families. The data suggests that many schools have recognised the need to develop systems and approaches that recognise the additional needs of some learners, and that considerable efforts have been made to make adaptations and modifications to the curriculum and the way in which it is delivered. The experiences of pupils in this study indicate that whilst some of the "specialist" provision made, such as the use of special needs assistants and the allocation of pupils to support classes may be regarded as emphasising the special educational needs of learners, the pupils themselves suggest that this approach enables them to feel welcome in Irish schools.

Whilst data were collected from twenty four schools situated across the Irish Republic over a four year period, the researchers acknowledge that this is a relatively small number of schools. However, the research model devised and the sample frame established would enable the research to be replicated within the country and internationally using a different sample of schools. The researchers who worked on Project IRIS are continuing to follow those pupils who participated in the research and will hopefully be able to report on their progress over a number of years. At present a focus must be given to considering how modifications may be made to the ways in which we obtain data through our interactions with children, and to finding better ways of enabling them to understand the research process. As we become more adept at this approach it is likely that the data we gather will become ever more effective in enabling us to understand the lives of children and young people. This should also enable us to become ever more inclusive as researchers.

We would suggest that there is considerable value in longitudinal studies in providing opportunities to consider the lives of children across an extended period of time. Not least in respect of the research reported in this paper, was the opportunity afforded to children and other participants to reflect on the changes in their lives over four years and to discuss how these changes had impacted their experiences and opportunities during this period. Such an

approach yields rich data that is less easily obtained through a single interview held at a specific moment in time.

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