

Factors Associated with the Effective Inclusion of Primary Aged Pupils with Down's Syndrome

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Abstract

It is now increasingly common in England for pupils with Down's syndrome to be offered a place in a mainstream primary school. However little is known about the impact that this is having on the schools and the factors that need to be considered for such placements to be successful. This article explores these issues further through a discussion of the main findings arising from a two year research project that focused on the inclusion of eighteen primary aged pupils with Down's syndrome who attended mainstream primary schools in six Local Education Authorities (LEAs). In particular, the research focused on the impact of the support arrangements and the attitudes of staff, parents and pupils on the success of the inclusive arrangements. Evidence from the eighteen case studies suggests that successful inclusion is less to do with the individual factors such as amount of support for the child. Rather patterns across the eighteen case studies indicate that it is the interaction of certain key factors that brings about the likelihood of a more successful inclusive outcome for the child. It would seem there is no one recipe but our findings suggest that children are more likely to be included if the class teacher takes a central role in the management of the pupil with Down's syndrome education and their support. Success would seem to be dependant on the ways in which the teaching assistant works with other support staff in the school and successful inclusion would seem to be dependant on the capacity the class curriculum to involve the child. We conclude with some suggestions as to how schools might seek to improve their practice in this complex area of work.

Aims of the Research

In recent years there has been a gradual increase in the number of pupils with Down's syndrome who are educated in English mainstream primary schools. Five years ago, Cunningham, Glenn, Lorenz, Cuckle, & Shepperdson (1998), estimated that between 70 and 80% of such pupils in the UK began their education in primary schools with 20 to 25% completing their schooling in the mainstream secondary sector. This trend is of course in line with the thrust of the Government's policy on inclusive education as indicated in the Green paper (DfEE, 1997) and the subsequent and forthcoming Programmes of Action (1998, 2003). Although there are no figures for the current numbers of pupils with Down's syndrome who are placed in mainstream schools, all the indications are that they have continued to grow since Cunningham et al reported in 1998.

Recent publications provide a range of accounts and guidelines on approaches to developing effective inclusive policies and practices for all pupils, including those with special needs (see for example Farrell & Ainscow, 2002; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Ballard, 1999; Mittler, 2000; The Audit Commission, 2002). These have been complemented by reviews of research in this area (for example Sebba & Sachdev, 1997; Paige, 1999; Harrower, 1999; Farrell, 2000, Farrell et al., in press). All of these publications highlight two key interconnected themes that seem to be central to the effective inclusion of students with learning difficulties, including those with Down's syndrome. The first of these relates to the views and experiences of mainstream class teachers (see for example Ward, 1994; Forlin, 1995; Marks, 1997; Davis, 2002; Ainscow et al., in press) and the second concerns the way in which support is provided to pupils with disabilities in the classroom (see for example Farrell, Balshaw, & Polat, 1999; DfES, 2000; Balshaw & Farrell, 2002; Howes et al., in press).

The aim of this research was to undertake a detailed study of a relatively small number of schools so that we could learn more about how support for pupils with Down's syndrome is managed, the origins of the current arrangements and the quality of teamwork. In addition we were interested in how attitudes of all staff, parents and pupils affected the inclusion and in the relationships between these attitudes and management of support in the schools.

Method

We worked with eighteen primary schools from six LEAs over a two-year period. Each school was responsible for educating a child with Down's syndrome who was placed in a mainstream class on a full time basis with varying amounts of support. All the schools were visited for a period of one week in year 1 and again in year 2. An important characteristic of the research process was the rapport that developed with teachers, support staff and parents which enabled us to ground our research in the perspectives of the participants.

The eighteen primary schools came from six contrasting LEAs from the North West of England. The selection of the three schools from the LEA was made following discussions with senior officers who gave the name of three schools for us to contact. In each of the two years of the study data was collected from the following sources in each school.

- Interviews with the head teacher, class teacher, teaching assistant, special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) and parents;
- Group interviews with parents of pupils who did not have special needs;
- Interviews with the child with Down's syndrome;
- Observations of the child with Down's syndrome in the classroom, at play and dinner times.

In the second year we added a sociometric assessment involving all the children in the same class as the child with Down's syndrome. We also carried out a focus group interview with a small number of his/her peers from the same class.

Initially data was analysed on a case by case basis. Detailed notes were made on the teaching and learning of the child in the context of the culture and organisation within the school in both years of the study. Following the within case analysis,

comparative analysis was conducted across the cases, which enabled us draw out common themes in relation to support arrangements and attitudes across the schools.

Context of Support Arrangements

The variation in LEA policy and practice in the education of pupils with special educational needs and the extent to which financial resources were delegated to schools resulted in a diversity of patterns of support across the eighteen schools which made comparisons of typologies difficult. For example the amount of teaching assistant (TA) support provided to the eighteen pupils varied from 15 to 30 hours per week with ten pupils receiving over 22 hours per week. However we found that the number of hours support was not related to the extent of the pupils' learning or behavioural difficulties and therefore pupils with the greatest problems did not necessarily receive the most support. In fact the amount of support provided tended to be associated with the common policies and practices prevalent in the school or LEA at the time.

Management and quality of the TA support

Variations in the extent to which LEAs delegated their resources to schools had a direct impact on the employment and management of supports services. Two of the six LEAs had a centrally managed support service of TAs who worked with the child with Down's syndrome. Therefore the schools in these LEAs had virtually no choice over the selection and management of the person who was employed to undertake this work. The centrally managed service also employed advisory teachers who provided training for the TAs and visited them in their schools on a weekly basis. In the remaining four LEAs, the schools were responsible for employing and managing the assistants, although there was often an LEA advisory teacher who might visit the school to provide advice to all staff, including the teachers and TAs. The frequency of these visits varied from once a week to three times a year.

Our findings suggest that schools preferred to have choice over the employment and management of the TAs. This arrangement allowed for greater flexibility of deployment of TAs among other support staff in the schools and prevented a feeling that there were two types of TAs: those employed by the school and those by the LEAs. In addition the role of the advisory teacher was not universally welcomed. For example the three schools in one of the LEAs felt that the advisory teacher lacked an understanding of how the school 'did things' and the teachers often did not know when the advisory teacher would appear. Furthermore there was little or no time for communication between the outreach teacher and the class teacher. Finding time to meet to discuss the child was a problem in all three schools unless the class teacher made it a priority or there was a specific problem that needed to be addressed.

However in another LEA we came across an excellent example of how an advisory teacher can make a positive impact in supporting the teachers, TAs and the pupil, thereby having a major contribution towards the success of the inclusion. The key to this success lay in the fact that the advisory teacher visited every week at a specified time when staff could be released to meet with her. In addition she had built up excellent relationships with all those involved in working with the child. Interestingly the same advisory teacher in a nearby school, in the same LEA was not such a key figure in the whole management of support. The advisory teacher had not had opportunity to form such good relationships and therefore the weekly visits were

not as effective as she only met the TA and rarely discussed the child with the teachers or other key staff.

Changes in LEA provision and styles of support, particularly in the area of the role of the advisory/specialist teacher, caused confusion in some schools whilst in others it prompted new ways of managing the support for pupils with special needs throughout the school. Several of the schools in the cohort had already looked to more efficient ways of managing their support provision and in a few cases this had manifested itself in the employment of a more specialist teacher who worked alongside the Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO). In a couple of schools this person had been someone who had been previously employed by the support service.

Relationships between the TA and the class teacher

This was a key element. It related to the style and effectiveness of the support arrangements. Poor communication between teachers as the classes moved up the school meant that any useful strategies that had been developed by the teacher were not carried forward. Consequently on the return visit it wasn't unusual to observe the new teacher beginning all over again in finding ways to manage the child's inclusion. In about half of the schools the class teachers were unfamiliar with teaching pupils with Down's syndrome. They tended to rely on the TA to pass on knowledge about the child and to take a key responsibility for managing his or her programme.

In marked contrast there were other examples where teachers had made efforts to collaborate with the TA in seeking information about the child's needs and to ensure that the TA was seen as part of a team rather than being marginalized and viewed as being in the class only for the child with Down's syndrome. This sense of teamwork illustrates the importance of the teachers and assistants working well together and learning to share ideas and to trust each other's judgments.

Support and teaching arrangements

A key factor in the successful deployment of support was the extent to which the class teachers took full ownership of the education of the pupil with Down's syndrome. The extent to which they took responsibility for planning the child's work in the context of the whole class planning had an influence on the way in which support was managed in the class. Thus there was likely to be far less reliance on individual work from the TA with the teacher spending more time directly teaching him/her. In such a situation the TA was able to provide more general support and it was more usual to observe the pupil participating more fully in the life of the class.

In relation to the number of hours per week that TAs were allocated to support a child with Down's syndrome some of our findings suggest that there might be a negative relationship between the amount of support and the extent to which the pupil participates in the life of the school. In those schools where the child received full time support and worked with an advisory/outreach teacher for an hour each week, there was a tendency for the class teacher's role to become somewhat marginalized.

In addition where the LEA employed the support assistant there was sometimes an expectation from the class teachers that the assistant would be the one who should be 'expert enough' to advise the teacher on strategies to use. In one example this was made worse by the fact that the support assistant, in an attempt to pre-empt any 'disruptive behaviour' would remove the child without any directive given by the

teacher and work with him on the computer away from the rest of the class. Unbeknown to the support assistant and the class teacher this had served to make him increasingly unpopular with the other pupils in the class since the computer was used by the other children a 'reward'. What was perceived by the other pupils as 'special treatment' but by the assistant as a practical strategy was unhelpful in terms of encouraging friendships and positive playground behaviour. It also led to the teacher allowing the support assistant to work with the child separately since this became the simplest solution. This at least enabled the class teacher to 'get on' with the lesson with the rest of the class. Although she found this way of working to be fragmented and unsatisfactory, she felt unable to do anything to change it due to the fact that the TA was employed by the support service and not the school. She felt it was the role of the advisory teacher to direct the TA whilst the advisory teacher expected the school to take ownership.

In another similar example the fact that the child was supported so extensively on a one to one basis from the TA in a separate and designated area of the classroom only served to highlight his problems and his "separateness" from the rest of the class. This way of working with the child became the norm and remained unquestioned as they moved up the school and as a consequence it led to teachers and TAs later questioning the suitability of the placement.

Reasons for a breakdown in support arrangements

There were a few schools where our findings indicate that the support arrangements were ineffective. This was usually the result of little communication between support and the teacher; the teacher lacking knowledge about the individual needs and progress of the child; a perception by the teacher of the TA as 'expert'; a lack of accountability within the school for the work of the TA.

Attitudes of Staff, Parents and Pupils

In relation to overall attitudes towards inclusion the vast majority of class teachers, SENCOs and headteachers felt that the 'positives' outweighed the 'negatives', although some voiced concerns, particularly in an educational climate of accountability and emphasis on performance. This concern was more prevalent for older children at a time when teachers were preparing their pupils for the Key Stage 2 SATs. There was an underlying tension between wanting to include the child with Down's syndrome with the rest of the class as much as possible whilst at the same time raising the academic achievements of the thirty or so other pupils in line with the expectations for the school.

Teachers with little or no experience of working with pupils with disabilities stated that they were anxious about including the child with Down's syndrome, particularly at the start of the year. A lack of communication between the preceding teacher and the 'new' teacher contributed to the high levels of anxiety. For some, this anxiety remained high for much of the year whereas in others it disappeared within a few weeks. High anxiety at the start of the year did not mean that the child was less effectively included. In some cases it was these teachers who found the most creative ways to include the child.

Parents were generally positive about the mainstream placement and a few expressed gratitude to the schools for accepting their child. Most referred to the struggle of finding mainstream provision. In relation to their child's education, most parents

were of the opinion that the TA was crucial to the effective inclusion of the child and that the teacher would not be able to cope without her. However there were examples of parents who expressed concern at the poor liaison between the school and themselves with a small minority feeling unable to discuss their concerns with staff.

For all parents the whole issue of secondary education was of concern with over half expressing the desire for their child to attend a mainstream secondary school while at the same time accepting that this might prove difficult.

On the whole, parents of non-disabled pupils saw the inclusion of the pupil with Down's syndrome as a 'very good thing' particularly in terms of developing positive attitudes towards people with disabilities. In a small number of cases parents expressed a concern about the inclusion of the child when there was a problem with his or her behaviour. The only parent focus group that was wholly negative in its responses was in a very high achieving school where the behaviour of pupil with Down's syndrome caused problems for other staff and pupils.

In each of the eighteen schools we asked the class peers of the child with Down's syndrome to write the names of three children in their class with whom they would like to work. The sociometric assessment showed that all but two of them had been chosen at least once by a classmate. Seven of the 18 had been chosen between 2 and 5 times and one was chosen by 12 out of the 23 classmates. This sociometric data suggests that in terms of the class peers' willingness to work with the child with Down syndrome, the latter was perceived at least as favourably as any other child.

Although reports from teachers and our observations confirm such findings and indicate that the attitudes of the pupils towards the children with Down's syndrome were generally extremely positive, some teachers expressed concerns about the extent of the "mothering" that was evident. Many recognised that this was not evidence of a genuine friendship. The issue was often difficult for the school to tackle since some saw it as a good sign that the pupils were visibly caring towards each other. They would remark on the way in which the presence of the child with Down's syndrome made other children more caring.

Where the child with Down's syndrome was able to play with other children on the playground on an equal basis (as opposed to being 'played with') the general quality of the within-class inclusion seemed to be better although there may have been several other factors, for example the child's age and ability that might account for this. For the boys in the cohort, an ability to play football greatly increased the potential for successful friendships with their classmates.

The focus groups carried out with a few of the pupils' classmates in the second year of the study yielded extremely rich and interesting data. Once again attitudes were generally extremely positive with no signs of rejection or hostility. However it was clear from the way the pupils spoke that they were aware of the problems faced by the pupil with Down's syndrome: that he/she was somewhat "different," almost "not one of us", although "no problem" to have in the classroom, but not a child whom one would likely befriend.

Summary and Conclusions

In coming to an overall conclusion then as to what factors are associated with the effective inclusion for primary aged pupils with Down's syndrome in England, we suggest that there are four factors that schools need to look in terms of developing inclusive practice:

- The centrality of the teacher in the management of the inclusion of the child.
- A complementary rather than compensatory relationship between the support and the teacher.
- The capacity of the class curriculum to include and involve the pupil with Down's syndrome.
- The quality of communication between teacher and pupil, teacher and teaching assistant, teacher and advisory teacher, and teacher and parents/carers.

The data suggests that if schools pay attention to developing practice within these four areas then the child with Down's syndrome is likely to be fully included both in the classroom and in the school and to make progress.

In those schools where these four factors may be identified, it is likely that some or all of the following features of practice will also be evident:

- The teacher feels supported and knows where to go for advice on ways of working with pupils who have special educational needs.
- The teacher is central to the planning, advising and monitoring of the arrangements for support.
- There is a designated time each week for the teacher and the support assistant for evaluation and planning.
- If there is an advisory teacher from the LEA, then the role is built into the schools support system in a way that is useful to the teacher and the support in terms of advice and strategies.
- If an advisory teacher works with the child, then time should be 'built in' for observing the child in the class and for providing regular feedback to the teacher.
- The school ensures that the class teacher attends annual reviews.
- The teaching assistant is a part of the whole class support to the teacher and not seen as an 'expert', as somehow "belonging" to the child.
- The Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator supports the teacher; is aware of how the support is managed in class and observes lessons. The role also works best when the SENCO is not a full time class teacher.
- The teaching assistant is accountable to the same manager as all other teaching assistants in the school and time is allocated for talking about Individual Education Plans and strategies.

Taken as a whole, then, the two-year study provided an opportunity to obtain a deeper understanding as to how the individual eighteen schools were making sense of the issues underpinning the inclusion agenda. Our findings offer insight into how staff and parents can develop policies and practices that should enable maximum participation and learning for pupils with Down's syndrome within mainstream primary education.

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