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A study of perceptions ‘significant others’ hold, of the inclusion of ‘children with difficulties’ in mainstream classes

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Summary

The perceptions of mainstream, teachers, parents of other children, and many other people, are crucial to the extent to which children with difficulties are accepted in mainstream classes. This study examined views of 507 ‘significant others’ towards the inclusion of children experiencing a variety of difficulties. They were asked to rank how they felt about children with certain types of ‘difficulty’, and given the opportunity to explain their decisions in a subsequent interview. Five main issues were examined, namely the most suitable age for inclusion, the problems faced by parents, the type of difficulty most suitable for inclusion into mainstream classes, the allocation of resources, and how resources should be allocated to children with different types of giftedness. Views towards these issues varied depending on the type of difficulty the child experienced. The findings of this study indicate, some children are more likely than others to be readily accepted by ‘significant others’ for inclusion into mainstream schooling. It was stressed, the perceptions of these ‘significant others’ impact upon how successful any attempt to include children in mainstream classes will be.

The aim of this study is to examine perceptions of mainstream teachers, and parents of other children, towards the inclusion of ‘children with difficulties’ into their classes. Rao and Lim (1999) point out, that teachers attitudes towards inclusion has a significant effect, on how successful it will be for any individual child. Taylor (1995) found, children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, attending a free standing unit, felt they were marginalised by mainstream children, when they joined them for certain classes. Schools may also be ambivalent, for according to Florian and Rouse (2001), and Howe and Welner (2002), they have to maintain the balance, between doing all they can to achieve the best test scores, and to provide opportunities for children with ‘Special Educational Needs’ (SEN).

Teachers attitudes towards inclusion vary. Leyser, Kapperman and Keller (1994), for instance, in an international study, found teachers with the most favourable attitudes, were those teaching older children. It was suggested, this was possibly a result of these teachers, being more concerned with subject matter, and less with the characteristics of individual children. In complete contrast, American studies, of which Chalmers (1991) is representative, found those teaching younger children, were the most positive. These conflicting results are compounded by the fact, many studies (eg Hannah 1988) have found no link between the child’s age, and the attitude of the teachers towards inclusion. The general tendency amongst teachers however, according to Garvar-Pinhas and Schmelkin (1989), is the further they are removed from the actual children, the more positive the attitude towards inclusion. Certainly Antia (2002) noted, that one of the major difficulties involved in the integration of children with hearing difficulties, was the attitude of teachers.

Key words: child, difficulties, gifted, inclusion, mainstream, school

The views of teachers and parents may not coincide. In an early study Freeman (1985 p 363), including 124 teachers and 118 parents, found teachers viewed inclusion of both the handicapped and the gifted as a good idea. whilst parents considered inclusion to have disadvantages. The attitudes of parents can impact on the manner in which their own children react, to the inclusion of ‘children with difficulties’. In a research review, Nowicki and Sandleson (2002), came to the conclusion, children preferred contact with those without disabilities, rather than those with physical, or intellectual disabilities. Magiati, Dockrell and Logotheti (2002), when interviewing 7-11 year old children in mainstream schools, found their views of different problems varied. Their understanding, for

example, of sensory and physical disabilities, was greater than of learning difficulties. The attitudes of teachers and parents are not formed in isolation, for they are influenced by other adults, who they may have contact with, and so the views of other members of the public may also have an impact.

According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), another factor influencing acceptance of SEN children into mainstream education, is whether resources are made available. Heiman (2001), interviewed 116 teachers who expressed their readiness to adjust their teaching methods to include children with difficulties, but stressed the need for appropriate training and resources. To make matters more complex, perceptions of different disabilities can also vary. Ward, Center and Bochner (1994) came to the conclusion, in their review of studies, the less severe the problem, the more supportive the view of inclusion, since the children were less likely to require extra instructional, or management skills from the teacher. Bowman (1986), in addition, found teachers concerned with the benefits to the child. Those favoured for inclusion were, first: those with medical or physical difficulty, and then those with specific learning disabilities and speech defects, There followed, those with moderate learning difficulties, then those with severe emotional and behavioural problems, and finally, those with sensory impairments, such as speech and hearing defects. Clough and Lindsay (1991), adopting a different criteria based on the difficulty in providing resources, found teachers ranked the least difficult needs to satisfy as those with sensory and physical impairment, then those with visual impairment, then those with learning difficulties and finally those with emotional and behavioural difficulties. The major differences between the two approaches, involves the ranking of those with sensory impairments.

A study of 19 PGCE students, by Marshall, Stojanovik and Ralph (2002) identified differences in attitudes, dependent on the subject matter being taught. Many students were concerned about children with speech and language difficulties, as they felt communication was vital to classroom activity. In technical subjects the students were reluctant to consider it appropriate to include children with physical disabilities, and cited practical problems and lack of resources as the reason. Dockrell and Lindsay (2001) found mainstream teachers, who had to deal with children with speech and language difficulties, were very conscious of their own knowledge gaps, and their inability to deal with the children's needs. Similarly Marshall, Ralph and Palmer (2002), in a large scale questionnaire study with PGCE students in the UK, found, whilst they had a positive attitude towards inclusion, they were concerned about their own expertise, and the physical time required to cope with the special needs of the pupils.

The terminology 'children with difficulties' has been deliberately adopted in this paper as it was felt, although not coming under the remit of 'Special Educational Needs' (SEN), there is evidence gifted children, and their parents experience difficulties. These are frequently not recognised. Tilstone, Lacey, Porter and Roberts (2000), for example, noted the allocation of resources to disadvantaged children is far greater proportionately, than that for gifted children. The advantages of inclusion seem to be mixed. Zeidner and Schleyer (1999), in a study of Israeli gifted children found, those included in mainstream classes, as compared with those in special enhancement classes, were better socially adjusted, but had a less positive view of the school experience. In a study by Hbert (2002), of three gifted children from low socio-economic backgrounds, it was found much was achieved under the positive influence of enriched teaching-learning opportunities. For gifted children 'special education' has very different connotations, and may refer to centres of excellence, such as music colleges, or schools of dance. Separation from the mainstream is often considered an advantage for these children. According to Perry (1997), there are strong feelings amongst parents of gifted children in support of separate facilities, and indeed, some research evidence does provide support for their case. Koshy and Casey (1997), for instance, point out gifted children may pass through the mainstream school virtually unnoticed, with their talents given little opportunity to shine. Freeman and Josepsson (2002) demonstrated the advantageous effects of a special enrichment programme, but noted the benefits were dissipated on their return to mainstream classes, as their teachers did not pick up on the improvements.

Teachers views of whether children should be included in mainstream classes appear to be determined, at least partially, by the availability of resources, and also the type of difficulty children experience. Parents may also have different views of the problems experienced by children. In addition the problems faced by gifted children, and their parents, are simply not taken into account in many of these studies (Porter1999).

The aims of the present research are to investigate:

1. The preferred age at which it is felt children should be included in mainstream classes.
2. The type of difficulty most regarded as a problem for parents.
3. The type of difficulty it is felt should received the highest priority for inclusion in mainstream school.
4. The type of difficulty which it is felt should receive priority for the allocation of resources.

5. The type of giftedness which it is felt should receive priority for the allocation of resources.

Method:

Participants:

507 people were interviewed including 238 males and 332 females. Of this sample 190 had no children of their own, 189 had children and 191 were employed as teachers. Neither those without their own children, nor the parents, had anything other than, at the most, a passing and very casual involvement, with children experiencing any of the difficulties to be the subject of the interviews. The teachers did not have any special involvement with children with difficulties, other than in the course of their mainstream teaching activities. The interest, from the point of view of this study, was to examine the perceptions of teachers, parents and other adults in society who may not even have children of their own. This latter group includes school support staff, eg dinner ladies and caretakers, nurses, the police, bus drivers, members of the legal profession and so on. These are all people without a special interest, or training to deal with children experiencing difficulty, but those who may well in various ways have an impact on them, if they do come into contact in many aspects of mainstream schooling.

The Interviews:

The structured interviews took place individually, at locations agreed with those taking part. These tended to be held in schools, or places of work. A small number were held in the homes of the participants. In these cases, where both partners were included in the sample, they were interviewed separately.

The structured interview involved a series of ranking tasks, intended to determine priority order. It was intended to identify the relative importance, or preference for, different types of difficulty. This approach was used to avoid the participants simply responding in what they viewed as a socially acceptable manner by selecting a neutral, or a positive point, on a scale. Most studies, according to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), use Likert style scales, and seek attitudinal responses. The ranking approach makes adopting socially acceptable responses less easy, and forces the participants to indicate their preferences. After each section of the structured material there was an opportunity for the participants to explain their decisions if they wished, or for the interviewer to probe further if appropriate. Another factor, which can influence responses, concerns the severity of the problem. Ward, Center and Bochner (1994) found, the more severe the problem the less positively inclusion was regarded by teachers. In the present study, the participants were instructed to consider all the difficulties included in the ranking task as severe.

The questions focussed on the five themes outlined previously. The seven categories of difficulty are shown in table 3.

The analysis:

The five themes are examined first from the perspective of the whole sample, second taking gender into account and third taking into account the three sub samples, namely teachers, adults with children and adults without children.

Results:

1. Age at which children should be included:

Tables 1 and 11 show the, 5-11 year period is the most important for inclusion, followed by 11-18years, with below 5years being considered the least important. This pattern is followed for the whole sample as well as the three groups separately.

Table 1

Showing age at which participants considered 'children with difficulties' should be included in mainstream classes

| Age group N= 570 | Mean sd in brackets | t-score | df | Prob |
|------------------------|--------------------------|---------|-----|------|
| Below 5yrs 5-11yrs | 2.37 (.85) 1.53 (.56) | 16.55 | 569 | .000 |
| 5-11 yrs 11-18yrs | 1.53 (.56) 2.09 (.78) | 12.63 | 569 | .000 |
| Below 5yrs 11-18yrs | 2.37 (.85) 2.09 (.78) | 4.50 | 569 | .000 |

Table 11

Showing age at which participants considered 'children with difficulties' should be included in mainstream classes

| Age range | Adults without children of their own n=190 | Adults with children of their own n=189 | Teachers N=191 |
|----------------|--|---|----------------|
| Below five | 2.43 | 2.44 | 2.25 |
| 5-11 years | 1.55 | 1.50 | 1.55 |
| 11 to 18 years | 2.02 | 2.06 | 2.17 |

2. The type of difficulty most regarded as a problem for parents.

As can be seen in table 111 the type of difficulty considered most problematic for parents was, children with behavioural problems, and the least, the gifted child. When the sample of participants is divided into male and female groups (see table 1V) except for the positioning of hearing/visual and learning difficulties, a similar ranking occurs. The same pattern occurs when the sample is subdivided (see table V).

Table 111

Showing participants view of the most difficult problem for parents.
Low score indicates high ranking.

| Type of difficulties N= 570 | Mean Score | Standard deviation | Likert Score | Standard deviation |
|--|------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Behavioural | 1.95 | 1.29 | 3.70 | 0.50 |
| Physical | 2.99 | 1.67 | 3.55 | 0.53 |
| Learning impairment | 3.22 | 1.36 | 3.43 | 0.56 |
| Hearing/visual impairment | 3.27 | 2.04 | 3.36 | 0.58 |
| Speech | 5.10 | 1.26 | 3.15 | 0.59 |
| Other (asthma, arthritis, epilepsy, diabetes, haemophilia etc) | 5.44 | 1.48 | 3.13 | 0.62 |
| Gifted | 6.00 | 1.49 | 2.54 | 0.79 |

Table 1V

Showing participants view of the most difficult problem for parents.
Low score indicates high ranking

| Males n=238 | Females n=332 |
|------------------|------------------|
| Behavioural 2.09 | Behavioural 1.85 |
| Physical 2.85 | Physical 3.08 |
| Hear/visual 3.24 | Learning 3.20 |
| Learning 3.27 | Hear/visual 3.31 |
| Speech 5.06 | Speech 5.13 |
| Other 5.39 | Other 5.48 |
| Gifted 6.07 | Gifted 5.94 |

Table V

Showing participants view of the most difficult problem for parents
Low score indicates high ranking

| Type of difficulties N= 570 | Adults without children of their own n=190 | Adults with experience of children n=189 | Teachers N=191 |
|-----------------------------|--|--|----------------|
| Behavioural | 2.08 | 1.93 | 1.83 |
| Physical | 2.85 | 3.00 | 3.10 |
| Learning impairment | 3.24 | 3.23 | 3.20 |
| Hearing/visual impairment | 3.16 | 3.16 | 3.51 |

| | | | |
|--|------|------|------|
| Speech | 4.97 | 5.08 | 5.26 |
| Other (asthma, arthritis, epilepsy, diabetes, haemophilia etc) | 5.32 | 5.57 | 5.43 |
| Gifted | 6.36 | 6.02 | 5.61 |

3. The type of difficulty it is felt should received the highest priority for being taught in mainstream school:

As can be seen in tables V1, V11 and V111, the 'other', physical and speech categories are the highest priority. In the informal interviews a large majority of participants expressed the view these problems made it difficult for the child to take part. They do not disrupt other children, or add significantly to the burden of the teacher, as they are 'outgoing' or 'transmission' problems, which primarily have to be coped with by the child. With, visual, learning ability, or behaviour problems they are seen as less suitable for inclusive education. Many of those interviewed considered these 'receptive' problems, made it difficult for the child to receive instructions, and so viewed it as requiring more effort on the part of the school to communicate. Interestingly behavioural problems, which are recognised as the most difficult for parents to cope with, are at the bottom of the list. The position of the gifted in the centre of the scale is noted.

Table V1

Showing participants view of the priority for inclusion
Low score indicates high ranking

| Type of difficulties N= 570 | Mean score | Standard deviation |
|--|------------|--------------------|
| Other (asthma, arthritis, epilepsy, diabetes, haemophilia etc) | 2.60 | 1.71 |
| Physical | 3.20 | 1.72 |
| Speech | 3.26 | 1.42 |
| Gifted | 3.33 | 1.97 |
| Hearing/visual impairment | 4.51 | 1.53 |
| Learning impairment | 5.18 | 1.67 |
| Behavioural | 5.89 | 1.53 |

Table V11

Showing participants view of the priority for inclusion
Low score indicates high ranking

| Males n= 238 | Females n=332 |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Other 2.61 | Other 2.59 |
| Physical 2.24 | Speech 3.16 |
| Gifted 3.25 | Physical 3.17 |
| Speech 3.40 | Gifted 3.38 |
| Hearing/visual 4.48 | Hearing/visual 4.45 |
| Learning 5.08 | Learning 5.08 |
| Behavioural 5.83 | Behavioural 5.93 |

Table V111

Showing participants view of the priority for inclusion
Low score indicates high ranking

| Type of difficulties N= 570 | Adults without children of their own n=190 | Adults with experience of children n=189 | Teachers N=191 |
|--|--|--|----------------|
| Other (asthma, arthritis, epilepsy, diabetes, haemophilia etc) | 2.73 | 2.58 | 2.50 |
| Physical | 3.18 | 3.24 | 3.19 |
| Speech | 3.31 | 3.33 | 3.14 |
| Gifted | 3.39 | 3.26 | 3.32 |
| Hearing/visual impairment | 4.48 | 4.65 | 4.40 |
| Learning impairment | 5.13 | 5.06 | 5.36 |
| Behavioural | 5.74 | 5.86 | 6.06 |

4. The allocation of resources, in terms of the types of difficulty:.

Table 1X shows this is almost the opposite of the priority for inclusion, and follows fairly closely the pattern seen as problems for parents. The highest priority goes to those children who have receptive difficulties such as learning and hearing/visual. Much lower down the list are those with ‘outgoing’ or ‘transmission’ problems such as physical, behaviour and speech. Note the gifted, and the ‘other’ category, are at the bottom of the list for allocation of resources.

Table 1X

Showing participants view of the allocation of school resources on the basis of priorities. Low score indicates high ranking

| Type of difficulties N= 570 | Mean score | Standard deviation |
|--|------------|--------------------|
| Learning | 2.55 | 1.73 |
| Hearing /visual | 3.28 | 1.50 |
| Physical | 3.35 | 1.75 |
| Behaviour | 3.62 | 2.04 |
| Speech | 4.58 | 1.44 |
| Gifted | 4.84 | 1.95 |
| Other (asthma, arthritis, epilepsy, diabetes, haemophilia etc) | 5.71 | 1.60 |

Table X

Showing participants view of the allocation of school resources on the basis of priorities. Low score indicates high ranking

| Males n= 238 | Females n=332 |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Learning 2.66 | Learning 2.47 |
| Physical 3.14 | Hearing/visual 3.23 |
| Hearing/visual 3.35 | Behaviour 3.39 |
| Behaviour 3.94 | Physical 3.50 |
| Speech 4.48 | Speech 4.65 |
| Gifted 4.86 | Gifted 4.83 |
| Other 5.34 | Other 5.84 |

5. The type of giftedness which it is felt should receive priority for the allocation of resources:

Tables X1, X11, and X111 indicate priority should be given for the three academic subjects rather than the practical ones.

Table X1

Showing participants view of the allocation of resources on the basis of type of gift. Low score indicates high ranking

| Type of gift N=570 | Mean score | Standard deviation |
|-----------------------|------------|--------------------|
| Literary talent | 2.15 | 1.39 |
| Numeric talent | 2.48 | 1.45 |
| Computer talent | 3.44 | 1.58 |
| Sports talent | 4.22 | 1.56 |
| Musical talent | 4.25 | 1.42 |
| Artistic talent | 4.39 | 1.36 |

Table X11

Showing participants view of the preference order for allocation of resources on the basis of type of gift. Low score indicates high ranking.

| Males n=238 | Females n=332 |
|---------------|---------------|
| Literary 2.20 | Literary 2.12 |
| Numeric 2.26 | Numeric 2.63 |
| Computer 3.33 | Computer 3.52 |
| Sports 4.21 | Sports 4.23 |
| Music 4.37 | Music 4.17 |

| | |
|---------------|---------------|
| Artistic 4.61 | Artistic 4.23 |
|---------------|---------------|

Table X111

Showing participants view of the preference order for allocation of resources.
Low score indicates high ranking.

| Type of gift | Adults without children of their own n=190 | Adults with children of their own n=189 | Teachers N=191 |
|-----------------|--|---|----------------|
| Literary talent | 2.29 | 2.14 | 2.04 |
| Numeric talent | 2.57 | 2.33 | 2.52 |
| Computer talent | 3.35 | 3.24 | 3.71 |
| Sports talent | 4.17 | 4.31 | 4.19 |
| Musical talent | 4.19 | 4.50 | 4.07 |
| Artistic talent | 4.42 | 4.41 | 4.34 |

When compared with other children who have difficulties, the gifted rank lower in terms of priorities for inclusion and for resources.

Discussion:

This study explores the perceptions and attitudes of people who are in a position to make the inclusion of children with difficulties a success, or a failure. As Antia (2002) and Rao and Lim (1999) reported the attitudes of others effect how successful any attempt to include children in mainstream school will be. This was supported by Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld and Karsten (2001), who found evidence, improvement as a result of inclusion amongst SEN pupils, was linked to a combination of, school characteristics, pupil characteristics, and family circumstances.

Age to be included in mainstream school:

The research evidence, referring to the age at which children should most advantageously be included in mainstream classes, is not clear. The evidence of the present study, indicating children of 5 to 11 years as being the most appropriate age group to benefit, supports Chalmers (1991), who reports younger children as the ones most likely to benefit. The present study also shows, there is a low priority for pre-school aged children, to be included in mainstream nursery classes. It would seem early is supported, but not too early.

The results of this study indicate views of different difficulties vary substantially, and therefore the implications of the findings for each type of problem will now be examined separately.

Children with behavioural problems:

These children top the list as being a problem for parents. They are, however, bottom of the list to be included in mainstream classes. This would seem particularly unfortunate, as a longitudinal study by O'Connor and Colwell (2002), with children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties, found evidence of improvement as a result of inclusion in mainstream classes over both the short, and the long term. The result does, however, coincide with the findings of other studies. Clough and Lindsay (1991), for example, found children with emotional and behavioural problems the least suitable for inclusion in mainstream classes, as it is most difficult for teachers to satisfy their needs. The findings of the present study support this far indicate, these children are only half way up the ranking, for the provision of school resources. During the interviews, it became clear, although it was accepted they are a problem for parents, the reluctance to have them involved in mainstream classes is, because they are thought to be difficult to deal with in school, and would thus disrupt other children.

Children with physical problems:

The next category to be considered a problem for parents are those children with physical difficulties. With regard to inclusion into mainstream school, they are regarded as almost the top priority, and are half way down the list for the allocation of resources. This coincides with the findings of Clough and Lindsay (1991). In discussion during the interviews, the view generally expressed was their presence had minimal negative impact on other children, and indeed might provide a 'good experience'.

Children with learning difficulties and those with hearing and/or visual impairment:

Although these problems are very different, these groups of children are ranked about mid place in the table, as problems for parents. As far as inclusion in mainstream school is concerned, they are ranked in the bottom half of the table, which is similar to the findings of Bowman (1986). For the allocation of school resources, they are in the top portion of the table. Clough and Lindsay (2001) found having the resources to satisfy the needs of children with learning difficulties most demanding. It appears this is something, of which, 'significant others' included in the present study are aware.

Children with speech problems:

These children present, according to Marshall et al (2002), a special problem for teachers as communication is regarded as vital for classroom activity. Although they are relatively low on the table of problems faced by parents, they are half way up the table for inclusion, and in the bottom part of the table for resources. In short children with speech problems do not seem to be very high on the agenda for attention. They lose out in all ways to other types of children's problems. The fact they have a problem communicating seems to result in them being ignored in the perception of all subgroups in the sample.

Children with problems such as asthma, arthritis, epilepsy diabetes, haemophilia, etc:

These children tend to be regarded as having a fairly low profile. They are not viewed as a problem for parents, are readily included into school, and are seen as requiring few resources. In many respects, from the point of view of priorities, they are perceived in a similar manner to those with speech problems.

Gifted children:

It is interesting to note, according to the data reported here, a gifted child is seen as being the least problem for parents. This really does confirm the view noted in much of the literature (eg Porter 1999). The general view expressed in the interview probe was having a gifted child was not the same as having one experiencing other categories of difficulty. There was little appreciation of the ceaseless demands on parents, who receive little social support. It is also interesting to note that gifted children are ranked in the middle of the scale for inclusion in mainstream school. This is surprising, for one would have thought teachers would have enjoyed the challenge, and have wanted such children in their classes to help stimulate, and raise others standards, and expectations. It rather looks as though this is not the case. Teachers interviewed in this study quoted work load, and other pressures, as reasons not to include. It does look as though a possible advantage is being missed. As far as the allocation of resources are concerned, gifted children are in the bottom part of the table. Looking at allocation of resources for the gifted children, the three academic subjects get priority rather than the practical ones. This goes counter to what is often the case, as there is a tendency for special schools and units to concentrate on practical, rather than the academic skills.

Conclusion:

Magiati et al (2002) found understanding by other children of 'children with difficulties', varied depending on the type of difficulty. The present study, conducted with adults, supports this, for they too regard children very differently depending on their characteristics. In addition views about the three issues, problems for parents, inclusion into mainstream school, and the allocation of resources are very different, depending on the particular difficulty. This does mean that generalised policies, which prescribe for 'children with difficulties' are unlikely to produce an outcome which is equally beneficial to all children.

Children seen as a problem to parents tend not to be thought suitable for inclusion, and those not seen as a problem tend to be prime candidates for inclusion. Those seen as candidates for inclusion, tend not to be seen as in need of resource allocation. The children they don't feel should receive priority for inclusion in mainstream classes, are seen to be in need of the most resources. The success, which occurs as a result of inclusion, has been shown, by Rao and Lim (1999) to partly reflect the attitudes of others. The findings of the present study show, these views vary with the type of difficulty. This does indicate the decision, as to whether an individual child should be included in mainstream classes, needs to take into account the fact that perceptions of 'significant others' towards 'children with difficulties' can be very different depending on the type of difficulty. In some cases it seems, effort needs to be made to improve understanding if perceptions are to be helpful to the child concerned.

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