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Citation:

Glazzard, J (2013) Resourced provision: The impact of inclusive practices on a mainstream primary school. *Support for Learning*, 28 (3). pp. 92-96. ISSN 0268-2141 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12025>

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Resourced Provision: The Impact of Inclusive Practices on a Mainstream Primary School

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Abstract

This personal account from a special educational needs coordinator illustrates the negative impact that Resourced Provision has had on one school. The provision caters for children with communication and interaction difficulties and is housed in a mainstream primary school. For this school, whilst the provision has had a beneficial impact on the development of inclusive values amongst pupils, it has also led to a decline in the overall effectiveness of the school. The achievement data of pupils in the provision has had a detrimental impact on overall school performance data. Current narrow measures of school effectiveness in England mean that schools with increasingly diverse student populations can pay the price for their commitment to inclusion as this example illustrates.

Key Words

Inclusion

Inclusive Education

Special Educational Needs

Resourced Provision

Introduction

This paper presents a personal account from a Special Educational Needs Coordinator in a mainstream primary school in England. For the purposes of this paper she will be referred to as Fran. The school hosts Resourced Provision for children with communication and interaction difficulties. The provision is based in the school and led by a teacher and supported by a team of assistants. There is an expectation that those pupils who are allocated places in the specialist provision will be able to access teaching and learning within mainstream classrooms for 80% of the time. For the remaining 20% of the time they are taught within the specialist provision, often on an individual basis. This time is used to focus on specific targets identified on the pupils' individual education plans. Undeniably Resourced Base provision is advantageous for several reasons. Pupils within the mainstream school are exposed to difference at a very early age. This fosters the development of positive attitudes amongst the pupils and prepares them for life in a socially diverse society. For those pupils with communication and interaction difficulties who are placed in the Resource Base, they are exposed to their mainstream peers who act as role models for language, communication and social interaction. However, in cases where the

child is inappropriately placed in the provision this can have significant detrimental effects on that pupil, their peers and the school as a whole. Fran's account illuminates the issues and makes recommendations for policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Foucault (1983) was interested in how power can be exercised to create dividing practices which 'categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches to him his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others must recognize in him' (Foucault, 1983: 214). Within schools normative practices make difference visible. Processes of normalisation serve to affirm or negate particular ways of being (Graham and Slee, 2008) and those who are included fall within the boundary of the accepted norm. However, the norm has its limits and the centre is reserved for those whose behaviour and cognitive ability falls within permissible and acceptable limits. These pupils are privileged and allowed to occupy mainstream provision. However, the pupils who transgress permissible limits are confined to the exterior. Graham and Slee's conceptual model of spatialised domains (Graham and Slee, 2008) provides a visual representation to illustrate how normative and deficit discourses result in the separation of those who are considered to be normal and those who are abnormal. Those who occupy the normative centre occupy a privileged position on account of them falling within the prescribed limits of the norm. Those on the margins are a minority group made up of different categories of impairment whilst those who transgress the boundary of the norm are considered to be abnormal and located on the exterior. The model reminds educators that inclusion has its limits and that inclusion 'functions to naturalise normalised ways of being' (Graham and Slee, 2008: 286).

Fran's Account

The following account is based on my experience of working, for sixteen years, in a small primary school with a Resourced Provision for 10 children with autistic spectrum disorder. Sixteen years ago I joined this school as a teacher in the early years. Until this point in my career I had worked in several schools where integrating children with additional needs into mainstream classes had been the norm. Inclusion was becoming a political agenda during the 1990s and it was at this point that I moved to this small school with a Resourced Provision.

The opportunity to work in a school which had actively sought to host a Resourced Provision for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder was an opportunity I embraced wholeheartedly. This was the job of my dreams. I had previously taught children with a wide range of additional needs, had loved the challenge, but had felt that on occasions the resources to support me in doing so had been somewhat inadequate. In my new role there would be additional and appropriate resources and more importantly additional human resources. I genuinely felt euphoric. Inclusion was what I truly believed in and here was an opportunity to further develop my practices.

The local authority had sole responsibility for placing children in the school Resourced Provision. The ten places available were quickly filled and there was always a waiting list.

The criterion for entry was that each child was capable of being educated with their peers in a mainstream classroom for 80% of the time. During the additional 20% of the time they were supported in the Resourced Provision to address their very specific needs. This was, in reality, an ideal that I quickly realised could not be fully achieved for some of the children. The needs of some of them were quite severe and simply coming into a busy and bustling classroom was extremely distressing for them. This was not an issue and became the focus for that child as they were slowly prepared and supported to overcome their fears. Sometimes this would take weeks or months, for others it was a very long term goal. Time, patience and reassurance eventually won the day and every second spent achieving every one of these milestones was so rewarding. Like all children, those placed in the Resourced Provision, had very specific strengths as well as very specific needs. Our role was to identify those needs and address them. For many of the children supporting them to come into a mainstream classroom was a huge achievement and enabled them to play alongside their peers or to simply explore their new surroundings. Some of the children began to interact with their mainstream peers and each small step taken by each child was celebrated. The benefits were not confined to the children from the Resourced Provision. Mainstream children quickly developed an understanding and acceptance of difference. Over the next few years many visitors to the school noted this acceptance and understanding and it was what, in many ways, made this school unique. I had joined this school full of optimism and drive and had never regretted doing so. I fitted perfectly, like a round peg in a round hole.

My enthusiasm, drive and belief in inclusion have never waned and in principle it never will. However the climate in education has been battered by the winds of change and in more recent years I find myself reflecting upon the realities of the situation in which the school now finds itself. Gone are the days when the achievements of individual very specific and personal milestones are celebrated by those who evaluate our performance, unless of course they relate to maths, reading or writing. This primary school remains a small school. There are only 126 children on roll. The school is now close to failing. Our own success has become our failing. The success of the Resourced Provision and our interpretations of inclusion were celebrated within the local authority. We supported other schools in developing their own practices. Our approaches and determination to adapt our practices to include many children resulted in our own undoing. Our reputation spread far and wide and over a number of years parents of children with special educational needs chose to move their children to our school. Many were on roll in mainstream classes and their broad and varying needs were effectively met. We have, to this day, several children in mainstream classes who have joined us from other schools where relationships between home and school have broken down irretrievably. We frequently fail to understand the reasons why. With careful thought and adaptations these children are now fully included in our school community. Our views and beliefs are as strong as ever and our commitment to each and every child has never wavered. The measures of success have shifted and in the current climate we are fighting to survive.

Currently almost 50% of our children have a status of special educational needs. The data for the Resourced Provision children is included in whole school data. There are also several children in mainstream education who have a statement of special educational needs, as do all of the children in the Resourced Provision. All cohorts are small and the impact of low progress data for a few children within one cohort can be truly catastrophic. The majority of

children with a statement of special educational needs are on the autistic spectrum and almost 50% of the children in the Resourced Provision have little or no language. They make progress but not always expected progress and if that progress is not made in reading, writing and maths it is barely recognised, other than by practitioners working within the school. We would not deny that our data is a first glance poor. There is, of course, a story, a very real story, behind the data. It is sadly a story that no one is prepared to listen to anymore. Autistic children frequently lack imagination and they can struggle to write in creative ways. They do not develop the skill of inference and their understanding of texts they have read can be very literal. These same skills are frequently tested and such tests are used to measure the success of schools. Two years ago a cohort of 13 children took the standard assessment tests before leaving the school. 9 of these children had a status of special educational needs and 3 of those 9 had a statement of special educational needs and had an extreme form of autism. Undeniably the school data was an immediate cause for concern for those monitoring the performance of the school. We clearly expected the inevitable fallout. It came swiftly. The frustration of explaining the reasons behind the data and our knowledge of each and every child was virtually ignored. Things had to change. There were to be no excuses. We were not offering excuses, they were reasons. Nonetheless the data had to improve rapidly. The message was harsh and clear.

My reflections on the ways in which we could secure change are born out of an on-going belief that children with special educational needs can effectively work with their mainstream peers and the need for the school to meet national expectations. There is no hiding place and as a school we must address the current and very real issues which face us.

The challenges and the realities of working with many children on the autistic spectrum is one that I have risen to for many years. Of course children on the autistic spectrum differ as much as any other child. Those with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome are frequently articulate and make good progress in school. We cannot and would not want to change our children. They are unique and valued members of our school community but I also understand that there has to be change if we are to survive as a school in the current educational climate.

My thinking began as I struggled to understand how one local authority could celebrate the successes of an inclusive school only to then beat that same school with a stick whilst paying little attention to the very real reasons behind the data. I reflected carefully on the criterion for children gaining a place in the Resourced Provision. Once accepted the expectation would be that each child would be educated for 80% of the time in a mainstream classroom. We had achieved that aim and if it had not been immediately possible that is what we had worked towards achieving. An additional expectation was that all children would be educated within their own age phase. This had not always been achieved. Several children who had been included in a particular class remained there for another year. This was generally because this was the best placement in terms of meeting their emotional or academic needs. Some children never achieved 80% of their learning time in classrooms. Their needs were far too severe and they gained little from being included in mainstream English or maths lessons. They were merely in the same classroom and this was not our vision of inclusive practice. Such children joined their mainstream peers when activities were accessible to them through carefully considered differentiation. It was during this process of deconstructing our systems and practices that I also began to carefully consider the responsibility of the local authority. If a child is to be included in a mainstream classroom

then, as for any child, they must be able to access the curriculum. Merely being present is not effective inclusive practice. Several of the children in the Resourced Provision are unable to meet the criterion set by the local authority and access mainstream classrooms when their needs can be effectively met. Parental pressures are often the reason children are taken on our roll by the local authority. Parents acknowledge that their child has learning needs but do not wish them to attend a special school whilst also understanding that full time education in a mainstream school is equally inappropriate. Resourced Provision appears to be a solution which meets their needs. It is in this way that several children are now placed with us who have little or no language and genuinely cannot access the curriculum within a mainstream setting. Several children are in fact misplaced and do not meet the criteria for entry. Their presence in a mainstream classroom, when they have not been carefully prepared, can be a disruptive influence. They frequently respond by screaming or running around and this clearly has a negative impact on the education of their mainstream peers. They need time and patience to overcome their fears and it is time that is no longer available to us. The current focus is that every child must make expected levels of progress. How can a distraught child make progress and how can their mainstream peers make progress in the presence of a distressed child? The losers are sadly the children from the Resourced Provision. To make the required levels of progress they must feel safe and secure and that does not offer us the time to support them and slowly challenge their boundaries. To achieve they are educated on a one to one basis. Their progress in reading, writing and maths is accelerating. Is this success? In a far broader context they are making little progress. The drive for success no longer privileges us with the time to effectively respond to individual needs to make inclusion the success that it undoubtedly can be. The Resourced Provision moves towards being a very small special school within a mainstream school. If we are to meet current national expectations we can do so only by insisting that those placed within our care are truly able to access a mainstream education for 80% of their time in school. Our hands have been forced and our beliefs and practices are untenable in the current climate of progress and attainment for all. Is this progress?

Discussion

Fran's account provides a very rich insight into the effects of Resourced Provision on a small mainstream primary school. The significant tensions for schools as they strive to become increasingly inclusive whilst also responding to the imperative of the standards agenda have been documented in the literature (Audit Commission, 2002; Thomas and Loxley, 2007). Inclusion operates under a regime of accountability (Hodkinson, 2012) which results in some schools being reluctant to admit those pupils who threaten school performance indicators. Consequently some schools are allowed to thrive, whilst those with more diverse student populations are left to fight for their survival. This is evident in Fran's account; as her school has become increasingly inclusive its overall effectiveness has been questioned by those responsible for evaluating the school.

The account demonstrates how Resourced Provision can result in the Othering of those pupils who have the most severe impairments. Those children who are unable to benefit from the provision in mainstream classrooms or those who disrupt learning in the mainstream these are the pupils who transgress the limits of the norm (Graham and Slee, 2008). They are confined to a life on the exterior (the Resource Provision) because they fall

outside of permissible limits. However, this results in very visible forms of segregation from within which and consequently these learners become the spectacle of a community which cannot include them. In these instances the Resource Provision then operates as a mini-special school but the powerful effects of disciplinary power are made visible for all to see. These learners who occupy the provision are confined to a life on the exterior. In this way difference is negated rather than celebrated and these learners are effectively punished by their exclusion from the mainstream. In these instances, it would be fairer and less punitive to place these learners in a special school where they are not made to feel different.

Whilst Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) found that there could be a mutual colonisation of the standards agenda and the inclusion agenda, Fran's account demonstrates how inclusion can result in overall school effectiveness being called into question. As Hansen (2012) points out 'inclusive schools also need to exclude some children in order to secure their own existence, even though they try to eradicate exclusion' (p.94). There has to be a limit to inclusion in practice because too much diversity can threaten the stability of a school (Hansen, 2012). Fran raises the issues associated with how the local authority allocates placements in the Resourced Provision. What is clearly evident within the account is that some children have been mis-placed in the Resourced Provision as a result of parental pressure. For these children in particular the benefits of being placed in specialist provision within a mainstream school are questionable. They are unable to access the curriculum in mainstream classrooms and their presence in these classrooms serves as a disruptive influence for other pupils who are able to benefit from mainstream provision. Fran has witnessed the negative impact of this on all children but particularly on the progress and attainment of those whose placements in the mainstream are appropriate.

Warnock (2005) warned that some mainstream placements for children with autistic spectrum disorder are inappropriate and lead to further segregation. The wishes of the parent need to be carefully balanced against the needs of the child before decisions about the suitability of a placement are made. If the placement is not appropriate for the child then it is not only the child who is disadvantaged; the school is disadvantaged because an inappropriate placement could have a detrimental impact on school performance indicators. Barbara Cole (2005) argues that 'inclusion can be a risk for schools if performance indicators are to be the overriding concern' (p.342). Although she argues that educators should be willing to take some risks in the cause of social justice, she does emphasise that this does not involve placing children in inappropriate educational contexts. This will clearly result in very little gain for those most vulnerable children and for the school itself.

Accounts like Fran's make an important contribution to the inclusion literature because they illuminate the real issues in practice. We cannot fully understand the effects of inclusion until we have access to these insights. Whilst Resourced Provision offers a real opportunity for advancing inclusion, it can also promote insidious forms of exclusion. The values associated with inclusion do not mesh easily with the values of performativity and this results in restricted form of inclusion (Hodkinson, 2012). Although literature has emphasised the relationship between inclusion and pedagogical transformation (Nind, 2005) there are limits to the extent to which mainstream schools can transform their pedagogical approaches under the umbrella of performativity. School effectiveness is evaluated on the basis of narrow performance indicators. Schools cannot risk admitting those pupils who threaten the stability of these because if they choose to do so their own survival will ultimately be threatened. Special schools are evaluated differently than mainstream schools and

consequently those mainstream schools which host Resourced Provision are placed in a more vulnerable position than special schools or mainstream schools without such provision. The inclusion of the achievement data for pupils in the Resourced Base is contentious and raises the question of why schools should be penalised for promoting innovative approaches towards developing inclusion. Fran makes an important point that the placement has to be appropriate and for it to succeed the child needs to be able to access mainstream provision.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This account illustrates ways in which inappropriate placements in resourced Provision have resulted in detrimental effects on pupils and overall school effectiveness. Despite being recognised for its strengths in inclusion, Fran's school has become the focus of additional surveillance as inclusion has had a negative impact on school performance data. It would seem that although parental perspectives significantly influence placement decisions, these are not always in the best interests of the included child or the school itself. It is unreasonable to expect schools to make significant changes to their policies and practices given the climate of performativity which currently pervades education. Schools can only transform themselves to a certain extent and consequently there are limits to inclusion.

Given the impact that such provision can have on school performance indicators and hence overall notions of school effectiveness it is important for schools with Resourced Provision to have the freedom to present performance data in different ways. This will enable school leaders to demonstrate the impact of Resourced Provision on the overall data for the school. Different data sets which show school performance data with and without pupils in the Resourced Provision should be publicised in school league tables so that schools with specialist provision are not discriminated against. Performance data affects public perceptions of schools and it is possible that schools with resourced Provision will be deemed to be effective at inclusion but ineffective in raising standards. Schools which strive to actively promote inclusion should not be discriminated against in inspections because they choose to admit pupils who may not be able to reach the national norms in relation to progress and attainment. Additionally, local authorities must ensure that placements are only offered to those pupils who are able to benefit from being included into mainstream education. Given the imperative to raise standards schools can only be reasonably expected to go so far in relation to the transformation of their policies and practices. To expect radical transformation to enable schools to respond to the needs of learners with severe impairments is unreasonable given the limited way in which school performance is measured. Inspectors must take account of the story behind school performance data. Consequently it seems reasonable to argue that different criteria should be used to evaluate the effectiveness of schools with Resourced Provision. Pupils with significant impairments may make significant steps in relation to progress in areas which are not valued or recognised in current measures of school effectiveness. This paper argues that these steps constitute valid progress indicators for these pupils and therefore supports Lloyd's view that there is a need to develop a broader view of what is meant by success and achievement (Lloyd, 2008). This would result in a more equitable way of evaluating the effectiveness of schools with Resourced Provision.

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