How inclusive are our classrooms?

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Aims of the project

Following a recent review of inclusion in the Special Needs Unit at our school, we felt it was appropriate to evaluate aspects of our existing strategies for inclusion. We wanted to discover more about pupils' perceptions of their own learning, and their attitudes towards the classroom learning environment and identify features of current practice that supported the effective inclusion of pupils with special educational needs.

Dimensions of the study

This study took place in a primary school in one of the more deprived catchment areas in the East Midlands. There are approximately 300 children in the school, which includes a Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) unit serving 38 children with 'moderate learning difficulties'. The study focused on 12 Key Stage Two children – four girls and eight boys from two mainstream classes and two classes from the Unit. We conducted the study over a period of half a term during their English and Mathematics lessons only. Of the 12 children, five had statements of special educational needs, and the remaining 7 were on the school's own special needs register.

Summary of main findings

- Pupil interviews revealed a perception among our pupils that they could only work with the support of adults

- Our observations raised our awareness of the fact that we only give limited opportunities for independent work. (Although we did not begin with this as a focus, it was something that came to our attention during the course of our research.)

- We needed to think more about the feedback we give and how we praise the children – whether we provide useful or constructive feedback or just a short comment about the pupils' effort

Background and context

There are three categories of special needs pupils at the school:

- Pupils with statements, placed in the Special Needs Unit, attaining levels in specific subjects comparable with those achieved by mainstream peers

- Pupils in mainstream with special needs in specific subjects, who are attaining levels similar to those within the Special Needs Unit

- Pupils with special needs in mainstream supported by Learning Support Assistants (LSA) within the mainstream setting

A major stimulus for our research stemmed from our consideration of the key points about educating children who have significant learning difficulties with a focus on 'inclusion' rather than 'integration'. The implication of the second approach suggests a change from simply placing children in existing provision to restructuring educational environments to foster a sense of belonging in all children. We wanted to know whether existing approaches were equally successful for all three groups of children. We wanted to identify good practice and use it to inform our approach to inclusion. We hoped to find evidence of well-motivated pupils who were more able to access the curriculum as a result of an inclusive environment.

Teaching processes and strategies

The study was based on processes as they normally occurred in English and Mathematics lessons.

The findings

From the classroom observations

Working situation: Children with special needs had limited opportunities for individual work; they were mainly supported by an adult and working in a group situation; for example, learning support assistants (LSAs) support up to five children at a table.

Responsibility for own learning: Where the classroom situation allowed, the children were independent, for example, collecting their own resources. However, this did not usually extend to independence in terms of tackling tasks. Nor was it felt to be feasible in the larger Year Six class as there were too many children in the class for them to be able to move freely around the room.

Problem solving: Children were found to rely quite heavily on staff for help with solving problems. These would vary from help with spelling, to not knowing where to find an eraser.

Feedback and praise: We found the teachers studied to be highly positive with their comments. They praised children for ideas, participation in discussions, recording, staying on task, and for using new strategies.

From the interviews

- In English, all the children identified staff as being the only resource that could possibly help them with their learning

- For Mathematics, the children seemed to have more awareness of the resources they might access – they could use a number line or a hundred square, for example. They also had greater understanding of the strategies they could use to help them solve problems

- A lot of the children identified the noise level as making it difficult for them to learn. Their other comments concerned their feelings about not getting enough help, wanting something explaining again, or needing further explanation: When asked what would make it easier for them to learn, one pupil requested resources such as counters and another child asked to be able to do things in little steps

- All the children liked receiving praise for effort and being rewarded for working well. They liked to hear 'anything nice', 'good try', 'brilliant', 'excellent', 'good boy' 'because you are doing so well you can have a free choice' etc. Receiving praise made them feel happy. Several children also referred to being motivated by the praise: "it makes me happy, feel good", "makes me happy, helps me go on better sometimes"

When we came to analyse our results we all felt that we needed to provide our special needs children with more opportunities for independent work (ie. without direct staff support). We were concerned that the children seemed to feel that they were unable to work effectively without staff intervention or support. We considered that along with praising the children for their effort we should also provide them with feedback about what they have done well and suggest a next step to encourage further independent learning.

Consequently, we set about building in opportunities for building independence into our lesson planning – such as taking the register, putting out equipment – things the special needs children were capable of doing independently and could be helpful with. We also created activities designed to show that they could succeed as independent learners, such as giving them a Maths exercise to do by themselves that was done in the same way as we had done as a group or sending a pair off on an activity to do together without help from an adult; for example, sending a pair of children into a sideroom for a short while to do a Maths activity involving money and a till.

We also set out to provide constructive feedback as well as praise e.g. If a child came to show some work we would try to pick out something specific to comment upon, such as: "That's great, you've got the first sound of every word right". We talked with support staff about the importance of both making positive comments to the children and prompting the children without giving them answers to further encourage independent working.

Research methods

We asked the teachers taking part in the study to continue to deliver their lessons with their usual teaching methods.

We used a 15-minute observation period to record details about:

- the working situation;

- teachers' use of praise;

- pupils' responsibility for their own learning; and

- what happened when they had to tackle problems.

We produced a coded transcript for each lesson, containing the following categories.

Working situation I-Independent, G-Group, P-Pairs, S-Supported by Staff	Praise/ feedback TP-Teampoint, V-Verbal Praise, PN-Positive Notes, S-Sticker or Smiley face	Responsibility for learning P-Pupil, S-Staff	Problem-solving P-Pupil, S-Staff

We followed the classroom observation by formally interviewing eight of the 12 children individually. The interviews were semi-structured and based on six questions that also allowed pupils to clarify their answers with further prompts. The questions included the following:

- What helps you learn in English?

- What helps you learn in Maths?

- What makes it difficult for you to learn?

- What do you like to hear from staff?

- How does that help you?

- Is there anything the staff or children can do to make it easier for you to learn?

We chose an informal interview setting for the youngest children and asked them questions casually to determine their feelings on visiting other classes.

Conclusion

Our research, with its emphasis on peer observation combined with pupil voice really helped us see how we could make our classrooms more inclusive for our special needs children. Backing off at appropriate times and giving the children space to work "on my own" or with their peers (ie. without adult help) was important to the children. It gave them the self-confidence to have a go. Our research also made us realise how everything you say counts –

praise is important, but prompts for what the children can do/try next are important too.

We feel the children have benefited from having more constructive feedback and from having more opportunities to work with different children and independently of an adult. We particularly benefited from carrying out the peer observation. We don't usually watch the adults in our classrooms – usually the children – so we found it an interesting approach. Involving support staff in some of the observations enabled everyone to contribute to discussions about how we work and how we can improve our practice.

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