

Suggestions for further reading

Whitehurst, T & Howells, A (2006) "When something is different people fear it – children's perceptions of an arts-based inclusion project" *Support for Learning* Vol 21 (1) p40-44


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National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise

Inclusion : "where do I fit in?"


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This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2006, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

Aims of the Research Project

To find out how perceptions held by mainstream pupils changed as a result of working alongside peers with Autism and severe and complex learning difficulties.

Dimensions of the Study

Special School: Sunfield School
Clent Grove
Clent Nr Stourbridge
West Midlands DY9 9PB
Pupils: 6 Children chronologically aged between 11 & 17 yrs

Mainstream School: Haybridge High School
(formerly Hagley Middle School)
Station Road
Hagley
West Midlands
Pupils: 23 children from Year 8

Summary of Main Findings findings

- Mainstream pupils with little experience of working with children with severe disabilities sometimes regarded them in a dehumanised way.
- Mainstream pupils' perceptions of children with severe disabilities were positively affected through interaction with them in a collaborative project.
- Mainstream pupils used teachers as role models to understand how to interact with children with severe disabilities.

outcomes

- Mainstream pupils' perceptions of disability changed as a result of working with children with severe and complex learning difficulties.
- Teachers needed to know how to prepare themselves and their pupils.
- Both mainstream and special schools needed to negotiate a mutual understanding of commitment to inclusion projects.

Aims of the project

The arts-based project took the form of a musical performance developed over a two year period and was based upon the tale of The Monkey King, an ancient story from Ceylon. The project involved children and staff from Sunfield (a residential special school for children between the ages of 7 and 19, who have severe and complex learning difficulties including autistic spectrum disorders), children and staff from a local mainstream middle school, and professionals from The Open Theatre Company and The Shysters Theatre Company in Coventry (both for actors with learning disabilities). The project culminated in a major theatre production presented at the Patrick Centre in the Hippodrome, Birmingham, attracting large audiences at each of its five performances.

The overall main aim of the collaboration was to create an enriching and self-extending experience for Sunfield students and to allow their abilities to be recognised and celebrated alongside those of their mainstream peers.

Teaching processes and strategies

Drama was chosen as a medium for the inclusion project as it provides opportunities for non-verbal communication and participation allowing many levels of access for participants, whether they are from a mainstream or an SEN population.

Rehearsals took place weekly from 4pm till 6pm. Nearer to the production, rehearsals were also scheduled for Saturdays. Many of the mainstream children found it very difficult to combine attending rehearsals with other after-school clubs and activities.

The class was divided into small groups of four children (3 mainstream and 1 SEN) together with a Sunfield member of staff. The groups worked best when they had:

- a focused task;
- adult role models; and
- an understanding of the practicalities of special needs.

The sessions were arranged in such a way that the mainstream pupils had the opportunity to watch how staff who knew the children with disabilities well interacted with them. The mainstream children were then able to model the behaviour of staff, learn new communication strategies and find out things they had in common.

Findings and outcomes

The majority of mainstream pupils had little or no prior knowledge of specific conditions and at the beginning of the project appeared to perceive children with disabilities in a 'dehumanised' way with perceptions of difference being paramount:

'Sometimes I didn't see them as people.'

'I thought they were strange and different – they were strangers and I wasn't used to them, but they were different to normal strangers.'

The notion of difference perceived by pupils reflected their lack of understanding regarding disabilities:

'I thought they'd be walking around not knowing anything.'

'I thought they were different and I was scared to touch them...I thought I may get what they get if I touch them.'

Significantly, many of the comments made by the mainstream pupils appeared to connect their perceptions of children with disabilities with their own feelings around a lack of preparation for the experience. Pupils spoke of their feelings of inadequacy regarding their own abilities, feelings of unfamiliarity, both with the situation and with the children with special needs, and feelings of vulnerability:

'I was frightened because I didn't know how they would react.'

'How are you meant to act around them? What are you meant to do? I was worried.'

Clearly, these pupils felt they did not possess the relevant skills to enable them to cope within this context, particularly in relation to communication. In an environment devoid of their normal referents, mainstream pupils were apprehensive and unable to predict the future with any sense of certainty.

After working collaboratively it was clear (from the children's comments below) that a shift in understanding had occurred. They found they were able to interact with children with disabilities, communicate and work alongside them with an increased level of confidence. The knowledge of disability, which the mainstream children acquired as a result of their interaction with SEN pupils, appeared to enable them to change their initial perceptions and form opinions based upon their experiences. Important to this was knowing more about the children as individuals rather than their disability:

'I think knowing more about them helps – like knowing what they can and can't do.'

'They're normal – you see past the disability and don't just judge them by that.'

Clearly, through discussion with the mainstream pupils it was evident that perceptions did change throughout the duration of the project and that pupils attributed this change to a level of understanding gained through interaction and not as a result of an enhanced knowledge base. The importance of this experience was eloquently captured by one pupil who stated:

'It was like looking through a glass window but to interact meant I was able to become friends with them.'

Having identified that there had been a shift in knowledge and realising that it had been possible for pupils to overcome the difficulties that they had first perceived when volunteering to participate in this inclusion project, the project team met with the mainstream pupils to discuss the ways that these obstacles had been overcome and what they felt had helped them make inclusion work.

Pupils felt that the whole process of getting to know the children with special needs, gradually over a long period and consistently, was important. Mainstream pupils had been surprised at the level of autonomy demonstrated by the children with disabilities – that staff had encouraged the children to employ their own calming strategies, for example. Building upon this, the mainstream pupils recognised and felt empowered by the knowledge of staff working with the children at Sunfield:

'You got to know them (the children) more.....it helped working with 'x'.....if there were problems then you looked at staff for the way they worked with him'.

'We saw how the Sunfield people worked with them and put it together with how we would do things – it was like child to child bonding.'

When asked what advice the pupils would give to other schools embarking upon similar inclusion projects, they responded by identifying good practice for both pupils and teachers. They suggested that pupils should:

'Start off friendly – get to know them – don't ignore them because it will make it harder later.'

'You must speak first – initiate the interaction.'

In addition, pupils felt it was very important that the teaching staff at the mainstream school were aware of the level of disability of the children, were prepared and able to adapt to the situation by using a different set of resources and that the mainstream pupils could look to, and feel empowered by, their teaching staff.

Research Design

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the mainstream pupils, within their own school. Pupils had been working on the project at this stage for approximately fourteen months. We wanted to find out to what extent mainstream pupils' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, children with severe and complex learning difficulties altered as a result of working collaboratively.

The questions were based on a distinction between perception of disabilities and knowledge of disabilities. For example, we asked, "Prior to working on the project, what was your perception of children with learning disabilities and autism?" We studied the pupils' answers to each question and looked for patterns, or themes, which were consistent across their answers. The students' comments were grouped according to themes, but the overarching theme was that practical knowledge was more important to them than factual knowledge.

Six months after the initial interviews we revisited the mainstream children to find out what they thought had been important in facilitating a change in their initially disabling perceptions and their ideas about what would enable future inclusion projects to succeed.

Conclusion

The researchers concluded that:

- mainstream pupils and teachers need to prepare before working on an inclusion project;
- mainstream teachers need to develop a supportive framework for their pupils;
- mainstream teachers need to "get stuck in" and work alongside their pupils;
- mainstream & Special School teachers and pupils need to negotiate mutual expectations;
- mainstream pupils' views of disability change through working with disabled peers; and
- all pupils are able to develop new skills through inclusion projects which have good role models, good discussion and sustained contact throughout the project.