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Teacher' attitudes to mainstream schooling.

Abstract

Children with a learning disability in Scotland, many of whom are likely to have behavior that challenges (Harris et al., 1996), are increasingly being educated in mainstream classrooms. The present study investigates the attitudes of teaching staff in Scotland towards the inclusion in mainstream education of children with a learning disability who display challenging behaviour.

Introduction

The educational context of learning disability

At the beginning of the 20th century children with a learning disability were not deemed educable and specialised institutions were set up by voluntary agencies to take in ‘idiot’ children, with the aim of training them to become valuable and productive members of society (Caine et al., 1998). In 1944 the Education Act (UK) addressed the lack of educational facilities for children with a learning disability and it became the responsibility of local authorities to determine if a child needed special education or if he/she was ineducable. The latter became the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Services, were accommodated in separate classrooms and were not entitled to an education. This changed in 1978 with the publication of the Warnock report which argued that children with special educational needs, including children with a learning disability, should be educated where possible in mainstream classrooms. The principles of normalisation (Wolfenberger, 1972) also influenced the educational provision for children with a learning disability around this time. This inclusion agenda has continued, most recently being enshrined in Scotland in The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (Scottish Government, 2004).

The term ‘inclusion’ has replaced ‘integration’ in relation to educating children with special educational needs and places an emphasis on restructuring mainstream schooling in order to accommodate the needs of all children, regardless of ability or disability (Avramidis et al., 2000). In 2004, the Scottish Parliament decided that certain children would not benefit fully from education without additional support and consequently they

passed the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act (ASL Act). The main aim of the Act is to create an improved educational system for supporting children's learning. The Act considers all children who require additional support in order to gain maximum benefit from their educational experience. By definition in the Act, a child is considered to have additional support needs when;

“.....for whatever reason, the child or young person is, or is likely to be, unable without the provision of additional support to benefit from school education....”

(Scottish Government, 2004; p.15).

‘Benefiting’ from the educational process refers to a spectrum of gains, including accessing a curriculum and teaching environment which is appropriate to their needs.

Research, however, suggests that a number of teaching staff working in mainstream schools feel that they have not received training which prepares them to meet the needs of this group of children (Rose, 2001) and do not always hold positive attitudes towards inclusion (Center & Ward, 1987)

Attitudes and children with a learning disability

There is a lack of consensus about the exact nature of attitudes, although it is thought that they are formed by multiple factors including personal experience, observation of others and emotional processes and they have a direct influence on behaviour (Baron & Byrne, 1991). Fitzsimmons & Barr (1997) define an attitude as a “predisposition to think or act in a particular way in response to a specific stimulus.” (p.58)

Social attitudes have been very influential in shaping the concept of learning disability (Reid, 1997) and how services are provided. It is argued that professional attitudes can both help to facilitate or hinder the implementation of policies, especially those that are viewed as controversial (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). One of the main factors in the successful inclusion of children with additional needs in mainstream classrooms is teachers' attitudes (Avramidis et al., 2000; Chow & Winzer, 1992).

During the 1980s a number of studies were undertaken to ascertain the attitudes of head teachers (Center et al., 1985) teachers (Center & Ward, 1987) and educational psychologists (Center & Ward, 1989) towards the principles of inclusion in Australia. Ward et al. (1994) summarized these studies and found that, while 80% of participants agreed that it was necessary to integrate children with disabling conditions in mainstream classrooms, attitudes towards children with differing disabling conditions varied. Children with aggression, a 'moderate intellectual disability' or sensory/physical disabilities were 'not usually' considered suitable for mainstream education by participants. Attitudes towards those children with less disabling conditions (e.g. mild sensory impairments, mild intellectual disability and poor attention span) were much more positive in regards to suitability for mainstream education. The nature of the disability, the extent of the child's educational problems and the professional background of the respondent were all found to be significant variables.

Center & Ward (1987) found that mainstream teachers were only positive about inclusion for those children whose difficulties were not likely to require additional management or

instructions from the teacher. This suggests that, at that time, teachers would prefer not to have children with a severe learning disability in their classroom, given that they would be likely to need 'extensive and pervasive levels of support' (AAMR, 2002), although it is unclear to what extent these results can be generalised to the UK. These studies were also conducted when the principles of inclusion were less dominant and, therefore, attitudes at this time may not be representative of current attitudes.

More recent research has found that teachers express more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with additional or special needs in mainstream settings (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) and Stoiber et al. (1998) found that teachers expressed more positive attitudes than parents. The factors that influenced these attitudes were similar to those identified in the earlier research. The key child variable was the severity of the child's needs and the associated demands that would be made on the teacher. Children with a learning disability, in particular, have been rated less positively by teachers along with children with emotional and behavioural problems. This is despite the overall attitudes towards the concept of inclusion of children with special educational needs being 'positive' (Avramidis et al., 2000). This suggests that children with a learning disability who also display challenging behaviour will be perceived even less positively.

Avramidis et al. (2000) also asked teachers what would be necessary to make their responses to inclusion more positive. Sixty percent of the 135 participants said that more knowledge of different disabling conditions and different strategies would affect their

feelings about inclusion in a positive way. A third said that they would need more training on the management of challenging behaviour and emotional difficulties.

Training has also been identified as a key factor in the success or otherwise of inclusion policies (Audit Commission, 2002, Garner, 2000) and to have a positive impact on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Jobe et al, 1996) although this latter study was conducted in the USA and so the results can't be directly applied to the UK. There is, however, a lack of any significant training about working with children with specific disorders, such as learning disability, in the initial teaching training course in the UK and while some attempts have been made to introduce training about 'special educational needs' generally, research has indicated that such training may have little impact on changing attitudes towards disabilities and inclusion (Forlin et al., 1996; Hastings et al., 1996; Tait & Purdie, 2000).

Many teachers also report that they do not have sufficient experience of working with children with SEN to feel confident about including them in mainstream classrooms (Jobling & Moni, 2004) and it has been argued that inclusion will fail unless changes are made to address this gap (Garner, 2000). Research in both the health and education sector has indicated that previous experience of or contact with people with a learning disability can improve knowledge (Johnson & Cartwright, 1991), reported knowledge (Golder et al., 2005) and attitudes (Slevin & Sines, 1996).

The aim of the present study was, therefore, to examine the attitudes of teaching staff towards the inclusion of children with a learning disability and challenging behaviour in mainstream education. The study also aimed to examine the extent to which there was a relationship between previous experience of teaching children with a learning disability, currently supporting a child with a learning disability in a mainstream class and attitudes towards inclusion.

Method.

Design

The study was questionnaire based and had a within-subjects design.

Participants

Forty teaching staff, aged between 23 and 60, from 14 schools participated. All but one of the participants were female.

Procedure

Following ethical approval from the education department, information about the study was sent to the head teachers of all mainstream schools in the area, inviting the schools to participate. Following consent from the head teacher, participants from 14 primary schools completed the Impact of Inclusion questionnaire (see below) as well as information about age, gender and experience of teaching children with a learning disability.

Measures

The ‘Impact of Inclusion Questionnaire’ (IIQ) (Hastings & Oakford, 2003) was employed to measure teaching staff attitudes. The IIQ was developed with a total of 24 items which correspond to four different domains:

- the impact of inclusion on the target child
- the impact of inclusion on other children in the classroom
- the impact of inclusion on the teacher
- the impact of inclusion on the school or classroom environment.

The IIQ has good levels of internal consistency for all the domains (Hastings & Oakford, 2003). Each item is rated on a seven point scale ranging from “very strongly disagree” to “very strongly agree” (scored as 1-7). The IIQ is scored by generating summed scores for each of the four domains. Scores on the four domains range from 6 to 42 (5–35 for the domain which considers the impact of inclusion on other children in the classroom), and the total IIQ score, which reflects overall attitude towards inclusion, ranges from 23 to 161. The higher the score, the more positive the attitude towards inclusion.

Results

Participants’ attitudes towards inclusion

Table 1 illustrates the mean attitude scores and the corresponding standard deviations of the participants.

Table 1: Participant scores on the IIQ.

| Attitude domain | Participant scores on the IIQ | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|------|-----|
| | Range | Mean | SD |
| Impact on teacher | 7-36 | 21.9 | 6.9 |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--------|------|------|
| Impact on environment | 14-33 | 24.2 | 5.3 |
| Impact on other children | 13-33 | 24.2 | 5.3 |
| Impact on Child | 16-34 | 24.2 | 5.8 |
| Total Score | 53-131 | 95.8 | 19.7 |

The years of experience of working with children with a learning disability ranged from 0-31 (mean = 9.03, sd = 7.72). A Pearson correlation found no relationship between years of experience of working with children with a learning disability and IIQ scores ($r=-0.157$, $p=0.382$).

Twenty-seven (67.5%) participants reported that they currently had a child with a learning disability in their class. A t-test found no significant difference in the IIQ scores of those who currently supported a child with a learning disability in their classroom (mean = 98.3, sd= 13.8) and those who did not (mean= 94.8, sd=27.2)($t=0.358$, $df=8.2$, $p=0.729$)

Discussion

The present study aimed to assess the attitudes of teachers to the inclusion of children with a learning disability who displayed challenging behaviour in mainstream classrooms. No relationships were found between years of experience of teaching children with a learning disability or currently having a child with a learning disability in the classroom and attitude scores. This is at odds with research which has indicated that previous experience of or contact with people with a learning disability can improve attitudes (Slevin & Sines, 1996).

The study found large standard deviations on the IIQ scores suggesting a broad range of views about inclusion, with some teachers appearing to hold quite negative views. It has been argued that a relationship exists between attitudes and future behaviour towards the attitude object, suggesting that some of the participants in the present study may need additional input to ensure that their negative attitude towards inclusion of children with a learning disability and challenging behaviour does not influence their behaviour towards such children in a detrimental way (Ajzen, 1991). Such negative attitudes may also undermine the success of inclusion policies (Avramidis et al., 2000; Chow & Winzer, 1992). It is acknowledged that attitudes can be difficult to change (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005) but there is some evidence that suggests that training can improve attitudes about learning disability and challenging behaviour (Lowe et al., 2007) and that the combination of didactic teaching and direct contact with people with a learning disability can be effective in changing attitudes (Ford et al., 2001, Campbell et al., 2003).

It is perhaps unsurprising that some teaching staff would hold more negative views towards children with a learning disability who display challenging behaviour, given that previous research indicates that negative attitudes towards inclusion are associated with the amount of extra support required by the child (Center & Ward, 1987). The level of support required for children with a learning disability can differ markedly from intermittent to pervasive (AAMR, 2002, BPS, 2000) and it may be that the teachers who hold more negative attitudes have direct experience of teaching children who require higher levels of support in the classroom. No relationship was found between attitudes

and whether the participants supported a child with a learning disability in the classroom, however information about the extent to which these children required additional support was not obtained. Overall, however, the mean scores on the four IIQ domains and the total IIQ score all indicated attitudes which were more positive than negative. This is consistent with more recent research which suggests that attitudes towards inclusion have become more positive as the drive for inclusion has increased (Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Avramidis et al. 2000).

Methodological limitations

The study had a number of limitations, including the fact that information on the support needs of the children in the classroom was not obtained. The use of a standardized questionnaire, while helpful in terms of knowing that the measure had good psychometric properties, did not allow for a more in-depth exploration of the factors that affected the attitudes towards inclusion of the teaching staff. Finally, as all the participants worked in primary schools, it is unclear to what extent the results would apply to those who teach older children.

In summary, the present study found that teaching staff held a wide range of attitudes towards the inclusion of children with a learning disability and challenging behaviour in mainstream classrooms, with some teachers holding negative views. Overall, however, the mean scores on the IIQ indicated that teaching staff attitudes were more positive than negative towards inclusion.

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