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How special are mainstream schools? Reflections on social spaces for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties

Ben Simmons

There is on-going debate about whether children with PMLD should attend mainstream schools or special schools. Whilst the United Nations has declared the right of all children to an 'inclusive' education, some commentators have argued that special schools provide the resources and teaching approaches that children with PMLD require.

This paper questions the logic of this debate. It presents research that explored the experiences of children with PMLD who attended mainstream schools. The research found that some mainstream schools were similar to special schools in terms of how children with PMLD were supported. However, the research also found that the specialist approaches used by mainstream staff created barriers to peer interaction. If peer interaction is a central goal of 'inclusion' then more work is needed to explore how school staff can balance specialist teaching approaches with genuine opportunities for peer interaction.

Introduction

Since the publication of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) the United Nations (UN) and its agencies have been staunch promoters of 'inclusive education'. Ensuring an inclusive and equitable quality education is a UN (2021) Sustainable Development Goal, and in the most recent Global Education Monitoring Report - entitled Inclusion and Education: All Means All (UN 2020: iii) - the Director-General of UNESCO has reiterated that inclusive education is a 'non-negotiable' right for all children.

Despite the UN's conviction for inclusion, the meaning of 'inclusive education' is often contested (Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou 2010). Furthermore, the UN is vague in its guidance on how inclusive education can be realised in culturally, economically and geographically diverse countries. However, what is clear is that mainstream education is integral to the UN's vision of inclusion, evidenced by its criticism of dual education systems that segregate children with special educational needs and disabilities (UN 2017). This criticism has been specifically aimed at the United Kingdom – a country which places the majority of children with PMLD in special schools.

Some commentators have defended the UK's on-going reliance on special schools. It has been argued that special schools are uniquely positioned to provide an individually-tailored and developmentally-sensitive education for children with PMLD, and that mainstream curricular, pedagogy and assessment tools are inappropriate for some learners (Simmons, 2021). Whilst some readers may agree with this view, it is worth noting that there is no research evidence to support it. Published studies that compare and contrast mainstream schools to special schools are rare, but they typically report positive results for children with PMLD who attend a mainstream setting. (Maes et al, 2021; Simmons and Watson, 2014).

One limitation of these studies is that they presuppose a clear distinction between mainstream practices and specialist practices. In reality, this is not always the case, and there are different educational configurations and collaborations taking place which have been overlooked by researchers. For example, some special schools work with mainstream schools and deliver co-taught lessons. Sometimes children with PMLD are locationally integrated on a mainstream site (they attend a 'PMLD unit' attached to a mainstream school). Some children experience a dual placement (they attend a mainstream school and a special school on different days of the week) and some children attend a mainstream class full-time. It is not simply the case that there is one type of 'special school' and one type of 'mainstream school'. There are different practices taking place, but such practices are not public knowledge and have not informed debate about inclusive education for children with PMLD.

This paper helps raise awareness of different mainstream practices for children with PMLD by presenting the findings of a study concerned with social inclusion. The study explored how staff and peers from different kinds of schools (mainstream, special, nursery, primary and secondary) interacted with children with PMLD (Simmons, 2019). This paper focuses on the data collected in mainstream contexts.

Methodology

Seven children with PMLD took part in the research. All children attended a mainstream setting on a part-time or full-time basis. A qualitative approach was taken which included participant and non-participant observation, ethnographic fieldnote methods, and interviews with teaching staff and carers (see Simmons, 2021 for more information).

Findings

Specialist mainstream schools

Some of the mainstream settings that participated in the study resembled special schools in terms of how teachers supported children with PMLD. These settings were an integrated preschool (which was part of a mainstream primary) and a secondary school with a PMLD unit attached. The children who attended these settings received all of their formal education in the setting.

Teaching staff in these schools demonstrated excellent subject knowledge of the PMLD field and interacted with children using what may be described as a developmentally-sensitive or specialist style of interaction. The style was largely dyadic in nature (meaning that one member of staff would interact with one child). Staff communicated with children in order to teach them how to communicate. For example, children were regularly encouraged to signal that they wanted ‘more’ access to a person, object, or activity (e.g., smile at an object to express ‘like’, or frown and look away to express ‘dislike’). Children were regularly asked to make a choice (e.g., between two objects, such as drink or food). Interactions often began with staff issuing a question or verbal instruction, followed by a range of prompts to encourage a response (e.g., verbal prompts such as repeating questions in a more dramatic tone of voice, gestural prompts such as pointing to an object, and physical prompts such as rubbing a child’s arm in order to arouse them).

These specialist mainstream settings contained resources found in special schools including a hydrotherapy pool, a multi-sensory room, a sensory garden, microswitches, and Eyegaze devices. The schools used pictorial communication system (PECS), E-Tran frames, and Objects of Reference. Staff were versed in Intensive Interaction, and the school received advice from external professionals such as speech and language therapists. There was almost no peer interaction (at all) observed in these settings, and very few attempts by staff to support such interaction.

Socially inclusive mainstream schools

Not all of the mainstream schools involved in the project presented as having ‘specialist’ expertise to support pupils with PMLD. Two of the primary schools worked closely with local special schools to provide placements for children with PMLD either one full day a week, or half a day a week. These settings lacked PMLD-specific pedagogy, materials, and routines despite children with PMLD being accompanied by special school staff. What emerged was a radically different style of interaction that revolved around peers (with and without support from a member of staff). This interaction was often plural in nature (the interaction involved a group of children, rather than one-to-one interaction). The interactions were often spontaneous, playful, emotionally-charged and mutually pleasurable, with lots of excitement, smiling, vocalisations, laughter, facial-looking, eye contact, and tracking. Peers without PMLD would perform for children with PMLD (e.g., sing, dance, pull silly faces, act out a scene) and offer gifts (hand-made greeting cards, bracelets and daisy-chains). Peers without PMLD would use an array of objects to initiate interaction. For example, they would show children with PMLD objects (drawings, Lego vehicles, painted masks) and give them toys to play with (e.g., placing toys in the hands and laps of children with PMLD). Pupils without PMLD would dress up children with PMLD (e.g., with feather boas and hats), demonstrate how to use objects (pencil sharpeners, iPads) and recontextualise everyday objects (making playdough shapes to squeeze, or tickle children with paintbrushes).

During breaktime children would volunteer to play, push wheelchairs in the playground, and help children with PMLD play games such as hide-and-seek. Interactions were sometimes physical, with pupils without PMLD greeting children with PMLD by rubbing their arms, holding hands, and displaying affection by hugging and kissing children on the cheek. Physical exchanges were also subversive. For example, during quiet time on the carpet, pupils without PMLD engaged in non-verbal forms of interaction, such as rubbing the legs of children with PMLD, leaning against them, using outstretched legs to rest whiteboards on, and holding onto the spokes of the wheelchair. Staff from the special school who accompanied children with PMLD to the mainstream school actively supported this interaction (e.g., by creating games for children to play) whilst also giving children space to interact spontaneously.

Conclusion

This paper presented data about teaching practices and social opportunities found in different mainstream settings for children with PMLD. It found that some mainstream settings were ‘specialist’ in terms of how they supported children with PMLD. The study also found that mainstream settings that lacked a specialist approach were more socially-inclusive for children with PMLD, leading to rich and diverse forms of peer interaction. These findings contribute to debates about inclusion by showing that PMLD expertise can be

found in mainstream schools and that some special schools collaborate with mainstream schools to provide different experiences. The research also shows that peer interaction between pupils without PMLD and pupils with PMLD is not inevitable, and that more research needs to be done to explore how peer engagement and specialist approaches can be supported in the same classroom space.

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