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Mainstream placements for children with PMLD: the perspective of teaching staff and parents

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There is on-going debate about the extent to which mainstream schools are appropriate for children with PMLD (Simmons 2022, 2021a, 2021b). However, the people who are arguably in the strongest position to talk about the issue - parents and school staff with relevant experience of supporting children with PMLD in mainstream settings - are rarely consulted. To date, there have been no published studies that report the perspective of teaching staff and / or parents of children with PMLD who experience mainstream placements in the United Kingdom.

This paper begins to address this significant gap in the literature by sharing the findings of a research project that investigated how mainstream schools and special schools offer different approaches to supporting children with PMLD. During the research, two special school teachers and three special school teaching assistants (TAs) were interviewed. The teachers and TAs were directly involved in supporting mainstream placements for children with PMLD (e.g. accompanying children to mainstream schools, observing and supporting their placements). A mainstream teacher and three parents of children with PMLD were also interviewed. The interviewees were asked to discuss their experiences of mainstream placements for children with PMLD, referring to the benefits and limitations of mainstream placements for children taking part in the study. Four main themes emerged through analysis and are discussed below.

Having fun and making friends

Social interaction between children was a central theme in the research and a key reason why mainstream schools were seen as important by parents and staff. Staff described peer interaction in special schools as 'rare', 'extremely limited', and 'once in a blue moon'. This was due to small class sizes ('Less kids means less opportunities to play') and a heavy reliance on adults to deliver education and care ('We probably do get in the way a bit. Children with PMLD need a lot of one-to-one input from us, and I think this creates a barrier to interaction'). One teacher suggested that limited peer interaction was 'inevitable' in a class made up of children with communication difficulties ('It's hard for two children to interact with each other when they are preverbal, when they have their own communication and sensory and movement difficulties').

Whilst peer interaction in special schools was deemed to be scarce, staff felt that there was an abundance of peer interaction in mainstream schools. They described peers helping children with PMLD with school work and playing with them at breaktime. This social interaction was celebrated by staff and described as one of the central purposes of mainstream placements, as one TA stated:

> Just look at what went on – Harry was laughing his head off! He loved it. Look at all of the attention and help he got. The kids are smiling and playing with him, messing about with playdough and having fun. Harry's looking around, laughing, reaching out to others and having the time of his life. He just…he just doesn't get this kind of thing normally. This is what it's all about. In [the special school] it's the staff who interact with him, but at [the mainstream school] he has me with him, but it's the kids that bring him out of his shell.

The views of parents closely aligned with the views of staff on what was commonly referred to as the 'social side' of mainstream education. Parents described the importance of making friends and interacting with children outside of special schools. One parent described how his son was in hospital for four months and experienced very little social interaction outside of his immediate family and hospital staff. Against this backdrop, the prospect of attending a mainstream school and making new friends was seen as a remedy to social isolation:

> He's a social kid and needs more social stuff. You know, more interaction with kids his own age. He's just a kid but spends most of his time around grown -ups. Yes, he's got disabilities, but that doesn't mean he should be locked away. He's gonna love going to [the mainstream school] and meeting other kids, he'll get loads out of it.

Parents spoke positively about the impact of mainstream education on their children. For example, one parent noticed a change in mood on the days that her daughter attended mainstream, describing her in high spirits at the end of the school day: "She just comes out with her happy head on and I can tell that she's had a great day!". Another parent described his son as being 'happy and calm, tired, like he's been busy' at the end of the school day.

Learning with and from one another

In addition to having fun and making friends, parents and school staff talked about the importance of children learning beside each other, and from one another. Mainstream staff described how a diverse student population was key to learning about and developing respect for difference. The simple presence of children with PMLD in the mainstream classroom was seen as beneficial. As one teacher put it: 'it helps everyone to understand that we all have different bodies and abilities, and it's OK to be different'. By contrast, staff members from the special school typically highlighted how learning took place through peer interaction (rather than simple peer observation). For example, specialist staff described children with PMLD developing their communication skills by engaging with mainstream children. This included children with PMLD learning how to take turns, express a preference for an object or activity, make eye contact and develop confidence and comfort around others. Mainstream peers were described as learning to initiate interaction and wait for a response from children with PMLD, learning to read body language, and having a growing understanding of the communicative actions of children with PMLD. One TA suggested that:

> Her placement benefits everyone. She's now making more eye contact and is generally more alert. She's definitely benefited from it, having the social interaction has been amazing for her. The other kids have figured out how to talk to her too, they say 'hello', hold her hand, wait for a response, and go out of their way to make her feel welcome.

Community belonging

Parents and teaching staff felt that children's participation in mainstream schools contributed to their inclusion in the local community. Teaching staff suggested that special school provision had an important role to play in educating children with PMLD, but also described specialist provision as a 'double edged sword', as one teacher described: 'We segregate to educate, but then there's nothing for them [children with PMLD] at the end of it, there needs to be more community integration and that needs to happen from a young age'. Mainstream placements were seen as a 'way in' to the community in order to 'raise people's awareness' of

disability. The views of teachers resonated with parents, who provided concrete examples of changes that took place during the research. Parents felt 'surprised' and 'shocked' when their children began to be approached by mainstream peers. Children with PMLD would be greeted by peers in everyday spaces such as parks, supermarkets and cinemas, and some were invited to birthday parties and playdates for the very first time:

> I just wanted to cry. Children watch him when we go out, they're fascinated with him but they've never spoken to him, you know? Now we go out and people call his name, some kid ran up to him the other day in the shop and just started talking to him, and he's even going to a party in a couple of weeks!

Challenges

Although the paper so far has reported largely positive views and experiences, there were some concerns raised in the interviews. The phrase 'age-appropriate' was used by staff and parents and there was doubt about the ability of secondary schools to support the education of children with PMLD. This, according to one teacher, was a product of a narrow, subject-based curriculum, the government's drive for increased GCSE attainment, and schools' accountability for students who struggle to keep up with peers. Furthermore, whilst mainstream primary school teachers involved in the project were typically praised by special school staff for being flexible, imaginative and supportive of children

with PMLD, there appeared to be negative consequences if the regular teacher was absent, as one TA noted: 'If the normal teacher is away, other teachers come in and don't care. They hand out worksheets and demand that the class works in silence. That's no good for our lot'. Successful placements required dialogue between schools, shared planning, and staff – particularly teaching assistants – who can support relationships between children and help make lessons meaningful for children with PMLD. When this structure was not in place, where there was no desire or thought about how best to include children with PMLD then staff from the special schools were heavily relied upon to 'wing it and find a way to make it work'.

Conclusion

This short paper described the views of parents and staff regarding the participation of children with PMLD in mainstream schools. The aim of the paper was not to describe generalisable findings, but to present seldom heard voices on the 'inclusion debate'. This paper provides a small window on this complex topic by discussing what some teachers and parents value with regards to mainstream placements for children with PMLD. As discussed, parents and teachers celebrated peer interaction as something fun and intrinsically rewarding in itself and as a vehicle for learning. Parents also described how mainstream placements led to children with PMLD being recognised and talked to outside of school. Whilst interviewees were mainly positive about mainstream education for children with PMLD they did highlight some concerns such as the extent to which mainstream secondary schools were appropriate for all learners, and the need for teachers to be committed to inclusion.

To date, researchers and policy makers have overlooked the views of families and staff who advocate for some kind of mainstream education for children with PMLD. Until we listen to all perspectives, policy development in the field will remain ignorant of the realities of the many ways that children with PMLD are educated.

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