USING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THEORY TO EXPLORE INCLUSION FOR PUPILS WITH SEN IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND

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Abstract

This paper reports part of a study which used student engagement theory to explore inclusive provision for pupils with SEN in a mainstream school. The findings demonstrate that these pupils had qualitatively different patterns of engagement from peers with no SEN. They reported less positive relationships with their class teacher, lower aspirations for the future, and lower self-efficacy. Student engagement theory shed new light on the on the complex interaction of pupils with their learning environment. Comparison between engagement subtypes provided a multidimensional understanding of the engagement of pupils with SEN, with implications for the inclusive teaching of pupils with SEN in mainstream primary schools.

Context of the Research

The impetus to integrate pupils with SEN into mainstream schools in England stems from the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and the 1981 Education Act (DES, 1981). The shift from integration - children with additional needs adapting themselves to mainstream environments – to inclusion – mainstream schools making reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of all students – began in the 1980s. In practice, however, there remains a gap between the ideology of inclusion and its practical implementation for pupils with SEN in English schools. Evans and Lunt (2002) argued that what inclusion means in practice is still unclear; according to Tutt (2007) this is because the long debate about the meaning of inclusion has prevented the development of effective practice. Lloyd (2000) argued that there has been no attempt on the part of policymakers to define inclusion. Clark, Dyson, and Millward, (1995) noted a lack of clarity caused by a fragmented evidence base. Dyson, Howes, and Roberts (2002) highlighted the tendency of existing evidence "to be embedded in conceptual development, advocacy and illustration" (p. 5) rather than practice, and Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argued that "little is known about the detail of practice at the classroom level" (p. 814).

There is thus some consensus in the literature about how little there is to bridge the ideology of inclusion to what is happening in schools. Yet 17.9% of pupils in schools in England in 2014 had identified SEN (DfE, 2014), so it is essential that teachers have the practical skills to meet the needs of such a large minority. Veck (2009) argued that "inclusive education must amount to more than securing access to educational spaces for learners who would otherwise be excluded from them. But how might educators and learners be included within an educational institution so that they are *of* and not *merely in* it?" (2009, p. 141, original emphasis). Evans and Lunt (2002) described the placement of pupils with SEN in mainstream classes with additional funding to provide individual support as a "weak" form of inclusion, yet this is precisely what research into inclusive practice found to be the norm (Evans & Lunt, 2002; Webster & Blatchford, 2013).

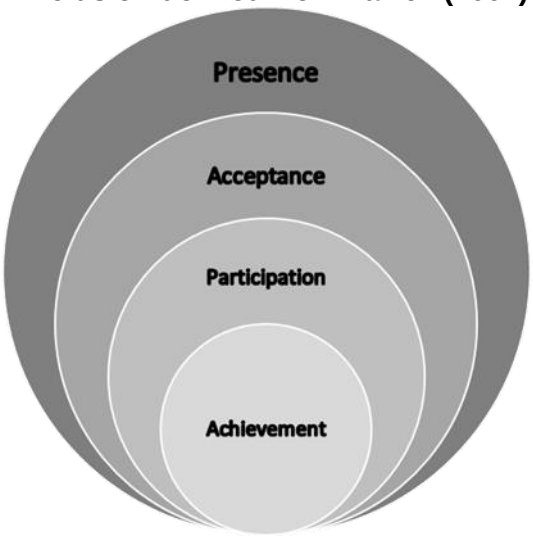
A shift in the way pupils with SEN are taught in mainstream settings (Russell, Webster, & Blatchford, 2013; Webster & Blatchford, 2013), and in the way inclusion is conceptualised (Evans & Lunt, 2002; Lloyd, 2008), were implied by the existing literature as necessary for turning inclusion into achievement. Indeed Nutbrown and Clough, (2009) argued that "inclusive *policies* only really find meaning in inclusive *practices*" (p. 192, original emphasis). This paper presents some of the findings of study which sought to develop a better

understanding of participation for pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms, and the teaching practices that support participation through engagement.

Participation as inclusion

Farrell (2004) proposed that inclusion comprises: *Presence*, *Acceptance*, *Participation* and *Achievement.* He elaborated on these categories as follows: "It is not… sufficient for children simply to be *present* in a school. They need to be *accepted* by their peers and by staff, they need to *participate* in all the school's activities, and they need to attain good levels of *achievement* in their work and behaviour" (Farrell, 2004, pp. 8 – 9, original emphasis). The study reported here suggests that these are not discrete categories but interrelated components which can be modelled as shown in Figure 1 below to reflect how the first three levels impact on the fourth.

Figure 1 Nested model of inclusion derived from Farrell (2004)



Participation is key to the inclusion of pupils with SEN because it combines active engagement with the social processes that facilitate learning, and at the same time develops independence. Its central importance to inclusion was highlighted by Farrell (2004); Booth and Ainscow, (2002); Dyson et al., (2002); Farrell, 2004; Florian and Black-Hawkins, (2011); Rix, Hall, Nind, Sheehy, and Wearmouth, (2009). The review of the literature carried out by Dyson et al. (2002), however, suggested that the link between an "inclusive culture" and participation was not clear and that future research should "trace links between action and participation in detail" (Dyson et al., 2002, p. 5).

In order to trace this detailed connection as called for by Dyson et al. (2002) the study reported here adopted a more specific definition informed by student engagement research (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), which provided a theoretical model of the interaction of pupils not only with their school environment but also with the processes that promote engagement in learning. The current study explored that interaction specifically in relation to pupils with SEN and the capacity of teachers to promote engagement for these pupils in order to shed some light on how to translate participation into achievement for pupils with SEN.

Student Engagement Theory

Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012) argued that "teachers are core organisers of experience" (p. 369), asserting that "engagement is a contextualized process mediated by relationships and interpersonal interactions" (p. 369). Skinner, Wellborn, and Connell, (1990) suggested a model of engagement which predicts that pupils who believe that successful learning is dependent on 'powerful others' (for example class teachers and other school staff) that they

themselves lack the ability to be successful at school, and that they lack the capacity to use strategies independently, also show low self-efficacy, low perceived competence and low engagement. Engagement is thus also related to pupils' self-efficacy beliefs.

Skinner et al. (1990) also argued that "children who are not doing well in school will perceive themselves as having no control over academic successes or failures and these beliefs will subsequently generate performances that serve to confirm their beliefs" (p. 22). Zeleke's (2004) analysis of 41 studies exploring the self-concept scores of pupils with SEN on measures of academic self-concept were significantly lower than their peers with no SEN. Pupils with SEN, who were identified as likely to be dependent on TAs and to lack confidence in their ability to work independently (Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005; Radford, Blatchford, & Webster, 2011), were also more likely to attribute success to powerful others. The Skinner, Connell and Wellborn model therefore suggests that pupils with SEN are more likely to show low self-efficacy, low perceived competence and low engagement. If engagement is associated with academic progress and achievement, and pupils with SEN show both low engagement and low achievement, the current study aimed to explore whether the engagement of these pupils might provide some insight into how to translate participation into achievement.

The current study used and developed measures that covered the four subtypes of student engagement as defined by Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006): academic, cognitive, behavioural and psychological engagement. The purpose was to develop a rigorous, evidence-based theoretical framework in which to explore the participation of pupils with SEN in order to address the lack of clarity in the existing literature regarding how participation in teaching and learning can be operationalised in practice and explored through research. The four subtypes were defined as follows: academic engagement comprises time on task, and the completion of classroom and homework tasks. Behavioural engagement comprises attendance and participation in classroom tasks, which includes the differentiation of tasks and classroom groupings and classroom interactions. Cognitive engagement is concerned with the extent to which pupils value school and learning, and the relevance of school to their future aspirations. Psychological engagement reflects pupils' sense of belonging to and identification with school.

Sample and Data Collection

The pupils and teachers of two Year 5 classes in a mainstream primary school in a county town in the South of England participated in this research. Classroom 1 was composed of 16 boys and 11 girls. Levels of attainment in the class ranged from 2a to 5c in Reading; 2a to 4b in Writing; and 2a to 4a in Numeracy. There were no pupils in the class with a Statement of SEN/EHCP, and six pupils in the class identified as SEN Support with a range of needs. Classroom 2 was composed of 14 boys and 13 girls. Levels of attainment in the class ranged from 2a to 5b in Reading; 2a to 5c in Writing; and 2a to 5b in Numeracy. There were two pupils in the class with Statements of SEN/EHCPs, one with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) given as his primary need, the other Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD).

Data relating to the four types of engagement described above were collected through systematic classroom observations, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews in order to capture data relating to all four subtypes, using both objective and subjective data collection methods in a mixed-methods design.

Academic and behavioural engagement can be directly observed and were captured using systematic classroom observations. A time-sampling observation schedule, which provided minute-by-minute observations of classroom practice, was developed for this study to measure academic and behavioural engagement and to facilitate comparisons between

pupils with and without SEN, with respect to the general structure of the classroom, teaching and task.

The Student Engagement Instrument – Elementary Version (SEI-E) was used to capture the cognitive and psychological subtypes of student engagement, which are not outwardly observable but better captured through a self-report measure. The measure is widely used across the U.S. and a growing body of evidence appears to confirm its utility (Carter, Reschly, Lovelace, Appleton, & Thompson, 2012).

Additional data were collected with pupils with SEN using a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to provide further insight into aspects of the cognitive and psychological engagement of pupils with SEN, specifically their perceived personal competence, interpersonal relationships, and sense of belonging (Appleton et al., 2006). The questionnaire was developed by Egelund and Tetler (2009) from the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2002) to explore pupils' perceptions of themselves at school. The semi-structured interview schedule was developed alongside the main data collection tools in the MAST project (Webster & Blatchford, 2013) to explore the experiences of pupils with SEN working with adults and peers at school. This schedule was used in the current study to explore the perceptions pupils with SEN of their classroom interactions, and the support they receive at school, more fully.

Results

Participation for pupils with SEN was different from pupils with no SEN both in terms of behavioural and academic engagement, as explored using systematic classroom observations, and in terms of cognitive and psychological engagement, as measured using the SEI-E.

Behavioural engagement was captured through classroom observations, which comprised observations of classroom and task structure, and classroom interactions. Pupils with SEN spent significantly more time working in groups and working on differentiated tasks than pupils with no SEN. They spent significantly less time working independently than pupils with no SEN. Pupils with SEN had significantly more interactions with TAs than their peers with no SEN, but a similar number of interactions with the teacher and with their peers. This was due to the amount of time pupils with SEN spent working in groups with TA support. Academic engagement was captured through observations of task-related behaviour. Pupils with and without SEN were observed to be on task for the majority of the time.

Items on the SEI-E relating to pupils' sense of belonging to school explored cognitive and psychological engagement. Analysis revealed that pupils with SEN reported a qualitatively different pattern of engagement from their peers with no SEN in terms of these types of engagement. For pupils with no SEN, Teacher-Student Relationships, Future Goals and Aspirations, and Attainment were all positively correlated. For pupils with SEN these items were negatively correlated: pupils with SEN reported less positive relationships with their teachers, lower aspirations for their future, and higher dependence on rewards for learning. Not all these associations were strong or significant, but they suggest that the engagement of pupils with SEN with school and learning follows a different pattern from pupils with no SEN on a number of factors relating to doing well in education and in future life.

Discussion

The current study stemmed from recent research suggesting that pupils with SEN need to engage more actively and independently with learning instead of being dependent on 1:1 support from TAs. It aimed to discover whether pupils with SEN have the skills to be more active and independent learners, by exploring their participation and engagement in

mainstream classrooms. Using student engagement theory to explore the experiences and perceptions of pupils with SEN, it found their participation and engagement to be qualitatively different from pupils with no SEN in terms both of behavioural and academic engagement, and cognitive and psychological engagement.

These findings demonstrate that even when pupils with SEN had the same access to teacher-led teaching and peer-to-peer learning as pupils with no SEN, their engagement was still qualitatively different: relationships with teachers were less positive; the motivation of pupils with SEN to learn depended on external reward rather than their own desire to succeed; pupils with SEN had lower aspirations for their future. Pupils with SEN demonstrated the ability to reflect on their learning and set appropriate learning challenges, but they were also dependent on a high level of adult support, had little sense of self-efficacy, and believed that they could only make progress with individual help. Differences between pupils with and without SEN were much more marked in terms of cognitive and psychological engagement.

Existing literature, for example Giangreco et al. (2005) in the U.S. and Radford, Blatchford, and Webster (2011) in the U.K., noted the risk of creating passive learners who are over-reliant on TA support and who do not take responsibility for their own learning strategies. Not only was this the case for pupils who participated in this study, this over-reliance also had implications for pupils with SEN in terms of their ability to work independently, and both the teachers and pupils with SEN who participated in this study believed that independent working was very challenging for these pupils.

These findings are consistent with Skinner, Wellborn, and Connell's (1990) model of engagement. Those authors predicted that when pupils believe successful learning is dependent on ‘powerful others’, for example teachers or TAs, they lose belief in their ability to be successful at school and in their capacity to work independently. Skinner et al. also demonstrated that such pupils show low self-efficacy, low perceived competence and low engagement. What the current study adds to the evidence is the role cognitive and psychological engagement play in pupils’ ability to work independently and the implications for achievement of pupils with SEN at school and their aspirations for the future.

Finn (1989) argued that participation involves identifying with school and class activities as the foundation of engagement, a process that occurs through the interactions and relationships experienced by pupils. Skinner et al. (1990) identified teachers’ involvement with pupils as a key factor in the beliefs pupils develop about their own abilities and the relationship between effort and ability. Pupils with SEN in the current study showed less positive relationships with teachers, low engagement and low achievement.

Implications for Practice

Strambler and McKown (2013), in research carried out in the U.S., identified three specific classroom practices that promote engagement. The first is the facilitation of social interdependence in group work in a process similar to that outlined by Baines, Blatchford and Webster (2015). The second is the use by teachers of specific strategies in the classroom to increase the status of lower attaining students through public praise and opportunities to display competence in particular areas. Cohen and Lotan (cited in Strambler & McKown 2013) reported increases in the participation of lower attaining pupils when such tactics were employed, and the teachers in the current study also reported a greater willingness amongst pupils with SEN to contribute publically in class when teachers engineered situations in which these pupils could demonstrate their competence. The third is the promotion of positive teacher-student relationships, which is contingent on how teachers respond to pupils’ academic and emotional needs. In the current study, pupils with SEN reported less positive relationships with their teacher and also found it more difficult to

respond to the emotional needs of their pupils with SEN. The current study demonstrates the significant consequences of this for their engagement and participation, and the lack of skill teachers have in this area, providing new insight into how inclusive practice could be developed in the U.K.

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Biography

Hester Riviere is an Educational Psychologist working for Oxfordshire County Council Educational Psychology Service. This paper reports some of the findings of a thesis completed in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology, Department of Psychology and Human Development, UCL Institute of Education.