Central or peripheral? Uneven Inclusion of Children with Autism in the Early Years of Primary School in Ireland

Eva García Albarran, Edurne García Iriarte, Robert Gilligan
School of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Dublin, Trinity College, Ireland

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The implementation of inclusion in schools has proved challenging, and research has shown that children with Autism are frequently the recipients of separating practices and exclusion from regular schools (Slee, 2019). In spite of the many widely espoused inclusive educational policy principles and directives at the international and national levels, and the support of research evidence, inclusive education is still a work in progress (Ainscow, 2020).

Evidence is scarce on the day to day interactions of children with autism and other educational actors in school (Pennings et al., 2014). Most research on the inclusive education of children with Autism has focused on teachers' attitudes, children with Autism social difficulties with their peers, adopting a deficit model approach, and teachers' training needs to cater for children with Autism (Humphrey and Lewis, 2015; Garrad, et al., 2019; Lindsay, et al., 2014).

To address the gap in research, the current study was conducted to shed light on the daily interactions in schools while putting inclusion into practice. This research adopted a qualitative methodology. Through observations, presented eight case studies outlining the daily interactions in the early years of primary school between eight children with Autism, their teachers, support teachers, Special Needs Assistants and peers in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom.

The study being presented here draws on data from this original research and presents two case studies based on a purposeful selection to illustrate contrasting approaches to inclusion. First, the case of Max, focuses on a child whose support fell short in terms of including him within the mainstream settings. Second is the case of Joe, a child who was supported alongside his peers in the school settings, thus facilitating his inclusive education.

The two contrasting versions of mainstream education in practice are discussed outlining what enabled or inhibited the inclusion of Max and Joe in their schools. The findings from the cases presented in this paper highlight how interactions, support, and participation are intertwined dimensions that shed light onto the paths that enable or inhibit inclusion.

1. Introduction

Inclusive Education has been underpinned by agreements and legislations at international and national level promoting education as a Human Right entitled to all children, including those with disabilities (UNESCO 2006, 2016). There is overall consensus about the importance for children with disabilities to gain access, be present, participate, and achieve outcomes in schools on an equal basis to their peers without disabilities as well as a sense of belonging in regular schools. Thus, inclusive education challenges any form of segregation concerning children with disabilities from their peers in regular schools (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2019). Despite the evidence provided by research on the suitability of inclusive education for children with Autism in regular schools (Waddington & Reed, 2017), the gap between policy and practice is still evident, as is shown in the number of children with Autism who are not placed full time with their peers in regular schools (UIS, 2018; Simon, et al., 2023). In Ireland, for example, children with Autism are often placed in Autistic units within regular schools, separated from their peers, on the understanding that this is the best learning option for them due to their «difficulties» (Shevlin & Banks, 2021).

For that reason and due to the limited evidence on how inclusive education is implemented in practice, it is necessary to gain knowledge on how inclusion happens in the day to day in schools (Ainscow, 2020; Shevlin & Banks, 2021; Slee, 2019). Therefore, attention is required to the daily experiences of children with Autism at the school micro-level, in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom where their teaching and learning takes place (Cameron et al., 2012). Particularly, concerning the interactions between children with Autism their teachers, SNA and peers in their everyday school routine. Because it is where teaching and learning takes place and it has the potential to block or enhance inclusion.

Interactions in schools have been shown in previous research to set the foundations of the different relationships between students and between students and educators (Rudasill, 2011; Wentzel, 2009) Hamre & Pianta, 2001. In addition, other results outlined that positive relationships between teachers and peers support the academic, social and emotional development of students (Hamre et al., 2013; Pennings et al., 2014; 2018;2020), while other studies revealed the important role of interactions in schools, at a personal and instructional level, in the classroom, playground and support classrooms (Cameron et al., 2012; Koster et al., 2009).

Pennings and colleagues also confirmed that interactions between students and educators are essential and involve interpersonal connections (i.e., one on one interactions between teachers, SNAs and peers with children with Autism) and instructional and contextual interactions (i.e., interactions that take place during classroom instructions considering the context such as the position of the pupil in the class) (Pennings et al., 2014, 2018; Pennings & Hollenstein, 2020).

However, research examining the interactions involving children with Autism within the school microlevel is limited (Jordan, et al., 2019; Cameron, 2014). Consequently, to understand how the inclusion of children with Autism takes place in primary schools, attention should be paid to the interactions between the education actors in the different contexts involved in their education at the school micro-level (i.e., the classroom, the playground and the support classroom).

The main research was conducted in Ireland, and it aimed to understand how the inclusion of children with Autism occurs in regular primary schools. The focus was on interactions in different contexts at the school micro-level. It explored how the interactions between children with Autism, their teachers, SNAs and peers took place in the classroom, the playground and the support classroom. In addition, the study aimed to elucidate how the interactions between the actors in the settings facilitated or inhibited the inclusion of children with Autism in regular primary schools.

The present paper, presents two contrasting case studies selected from the main research, due to space constraints on the paper. The cases are aiming to illustrate the practicalities involved in the inclusion

of these two cases. The cases are very different concerning interactions, approach to support and the inclusive experience of these children with Autism.
The paper focuses on the day to day school life of Max and Joe, revealing the nuances and complexities of interactions relevant to them, among the different education actors. The two cases showed how the interplay between interactions connected or not to support enabled or inhibited the inclusion of these two children in their classrooms, playground and support classroom.

2. Method

2.1. Design of the original study

The primary research, a small-scale, qualitative, exploratory, embedded multiple case study research was completed between June 2016 and June 2017. It involved five regular primary schools and eight children with Autism, their classroom and support teachers, SNA, and peers. The cases were embedded, involving three settings (i.e., classroom, playground and support classroom) and different participants (i.e., children with Autism, classroom teachers, support teachers, SNAs and peers). The cases allowed the study of the phenomenon within the context. The multiple embedded case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of the interactions in context (i.e., five schools, the classrooms, playgrounds, and support classrooms) (Merriam, 1988; Stake et al., 2006; Yin, 2014).

2.2. Sample and recruitment

The two cases presented in this paper; Max (8 years old, first class) and Joe (7 years old, first class) were recruited by purposive sampling. The recruitment of schools and participants occurred upon approval by their respective Boards of Management. Principals informed parents about the study and once parents consented to participate, the school staff (Principal, Teachers, SNAs and Support Teachers) signed their informed Consents. For ethical reasons, the assent of the participant children with Autism was sought after, once they got accustomed to the researcher's presence. The two cases presented in this paper; Max (8 years old, first class) and Joe (7 years old, first class) were recruited through purposive sampling. The recruitment of participants occurred upon approval by their respective School Boards of Management. Principals informed parents about the study and once parents consented to participate, the school staff (principal, teachers, SNAs and support teachers) signed their informed consents. For ethical reasons, the assent of the participant children with Autism was sought after, once they got accustomed to the researcher's presence. Children with Autism's informed assent were developed using children friendly language and pictures and read out loud to them by the researcher, to help the child to understand what the study was about. Assent was given by the child in the presence of an SNA who acted as a witness of the child assent to the study. In addition, parents of all pupils in the classroom were informed by the school principal in writing about the study. In addition, parents of all pupils in the classroom were informed by the school principal in writing about the study.

2.3. Data collection

The method of data collection used in the study was semi-structured, non-participant direct observations. The observations focused on the interactions between the different education actors in the classroom, support classroom and playground (Robson, 2011). The adopted method of data collection enabled access to the interactions within the natural contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Max and Joe were observed in the classroom, playground and support classroom for a total of 7 days and 6 days respectively. The daily observations included 4 hours in the classroom, 40 minutes in the playground, and 45 minutes in the support classroom.

3. Analysis

The study data, including the two cases presented in this paper were analyses adopting Braun and Clarke's steps for thematic analysis. This approach allowed for the interpretation of the data and the exploration of the context during this interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The exploratory nature of the research required an inductive approach when analysing the data to enable new themes and patterns to emerge. Additionally, the identified themes and subthemes were reviewed to ensure their internal consistency, and to guarantee that the themes were telling a coherent story. The external heterogeneity was also reviewed to guarantee that the themes were unique and different from other themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Results

This section presents the results from Max and Joe; two case studies based on a purposeful selection to illustrate contrasting approaches to inclusion. The first case presented here is Max, a child whose support reduced the time he shared with his peers during classroom formal instruction and in the playground, limiting his inclusive education. The second case relates to Joe, a child supported to participate along with his peers in the school settings, which seemed to facilitate his inclusive education.

4.1. Max

Max was an eight-year-old boy attending first class in his local regular primary school in Ireland. The total number of pupils in the class was 23. Max's support arrangements in school involved arriving at school twenty minutes after the morning rush and ten minutes after his peers had settled in the classroom. Max also received 30 minutes of daily support in the support classroom along with two other pupils with disabilities from different classrooms. Max also had full-time SNA support, to assist him in his daily school activities in the classroom, while also working individually with him in a separated section within the classroom (work station) during group activities, and in the playground.

Max's classroom was spacious and bright. He availed of a built-in workstation, where Max worked on his differentiated curriculum with computer-based literacy and numeracy activities with the support of the SNA. This routine involved 3.5 hours out of the 5 hours of the school day. Max joined the peer group for instruction in mathematics, art, physical education, and computer lessons, and he also shared lunch and recess in the playground with his peers. In addition, Max had two separate breaks in the sensory room for 20 minutes, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

The interactions between Max, his teacher, SNA and peers in the classroom varied between structured lessons (formal and informal) and unstructured lessons. During structured and formal lessons (i.e., literacy and numeracy), Max's participation in classroom lessons was limited, with teaching and learning practices taking place in the workstation separated from the group. This approach did not seem to work with Max since he often walked around the classroom, attempting in some cases to get his teacher and peers' attention. During formal lessons the interactions between Max and his teacher were minimal, and they were characterised by a reliance on the SNA's support (academic and social), with limited teacher interaction and support. Concerning his peers, the interactions were also reduced during formal lessons, which could be explained by the physical barrier imposed by his workstation, which inhibited Max's opportunity to participate in the same activities within the group.

On the other hand, when Max was placed with the group during structured and informal lessons (PE, Artwork and computer, playground), the interactions between Max, his teacher and his peers were fluid, pupils and teacher worked alongside Max during classroom work. During these activities, Max was placed within the group, and he was provided with

full teacher support to enable his full participation. Max appeared engaged, and his behaviour differed considerably from what was experienced when he was placed away from the group, (i.e., moving around the classroom and running outside). During structured and informal lessons, Max worked with his peers on different projects, and he was involved in leading the group with his teacher's support. Additionally, the SNA support was indirect, with reduced close presence, which allowed Max to spend more time with his peers.

Generally, during formal lessons, the teacher delegated Max's teaching and learning to his SNA, limiting his interaction with Max only when he refused to follow the rules of the classroom and playground. Concerning Max interactions with his Support Teacher, he was unhappy going to the support classroom (almost every day). During their sessions, Max's showed limited focus on the work provided. As a result, the support teacher tended to allow Max to work with his iPad while the teacher concentrated on providing support to the other two to three students in the classroom at the time. In the playground, Max was under the constant supervision of his SNA. The two of them were often walking around the playground, while the rest of the students were playing together.Sometimes his SNA encouraged his peers to include Max on their games, but often the dynamics of the group did not work with Max (i.e., different understanding on the rules of the game between peers and Max).

In conclusion, the present case study exhibited different interactions between Max and the group that seemed to depend on the level of participation and support presented to Max during different activities in the different settings. These interactions placed Max either on the periphery or central to the group, facilitating or inhibiting his interactions and, at the same time, his inclusion across the three in-school settings.

4.2. Joe

Joe was a seven-year-old boy attending first class in his local regular primary school. The total number of pupils in the classroom was 31, three of whom had learning difficulties (2 children with Autism and one with intellectual disabilities). All three children received support from two SNAs who were allocated full-time in the classroom and the playground. Joe's accommodation involved access to a built-in library located beside his group table. This was available to use when Joe required time out from the noise of the classroom, but he was encouraged not to use it during lessons. Additionally, Joe was allowed to scribble on the whiteboard located near his desk, which took place while the teacher transition from one lesson to the next. This seemed to allow Joe to relax when his peers were moving around when getting ready for the next lesson or the playground.

For the academic year, Joe had a support teacher for 45 minutes every day. The SNA support involved supporting Joe to navigate the classroom and the playground environment. In the classroom, the SNA's responsibilities ensured that Joe was focused on the lessons and assisting Joe in the transition between lessons. In the playground, the SNA supervised Joe from a distant position with no other interference. Every morning the teacher informed the SNAs about the classroom plans and guided them on the strategies to follow with the children under their care. Joe spent most of his school hours in the classroom except for the time allocated to his support teacher. He did not have any apparent curriculum differentiation, and he participated and contributed to all classroom activities similarly to his peers. However, Joe received his teacher's support during lessons which took place in situ and in accordance to Joe's needs at the time. Generally, Joe was not talkative, and seemed happy on his own. Nevertheless, he engaged in conversation with his teacher and peers if requested.

Among the strategies put into practice in the classroom, the teacher closely supervised the SNA support and guided the SNA's help to Joe in line with her teaching and learning plan to facilitate Joe's participation and engagement in group activities. The SNA maintained a certain distance from Joe in the classroom and the playground. She was present and provided support when necessary (i.e., ensuring his focus in the lessons, walking by his side to the playground), but she allowed Joe to navigate the school context at his pace.

In this case study, the teacher implemented a series of support strategies in the classroom across the different activities [structured lessons (formal/ informal) and unstructured lessons]. Firstly, Joe was provided with contextual accommodations within the classroom physical space; Joe was located near the library and the whiteboard to enable him to scribble and relax during transitions. For example, Joe's position in the classroom near the wall and the window gave him room to safely rock his chair and easy access to the library and the whiteboard. In addition, his access to the interactive board and his teacher enabled interactions between Joe, his teacher and his peers and facilitated Joe's participation and contribution during lessons.

In the classroom, Joe was appointed table captain to distribute the workbooks, providing him with responsibility and status among his peers in the group. In addition he was placed first in the line going to the playground which gave Joe more space and felt less crowded. This strategy seemed to keep the child calm, enabling further interactions. In addition, the teacher implemented tailored strategies to facilitate Joe's participation in and contribution to the classroom's formal and informal lessons. For example, when Joe completed tasks on the interactive board as part of his learning assessment, his teacher guided him on the task, enabling participation in the same activities as the rest of his classmates. Although differentiation from peers was present because the teacher adjusted the task and the questions to suit Joe's level, this differentiation was embedded seamlessly within the teaching and learning of the entire class.

The findings in Joe's case study revealed that the management of tailored support, and accommodation in the teaching plan as well as the classroom context promoted Joe's interactions and participation which seemed to place him central to the group. This case study revealed the critical role of the classroom teachers working alongside the SNA to ensure the implementation of support and accommodations appropriate to facilitate Joe's classroom participation, which seemed to reinforce interactions in the classroom and playground.

5. Discussion

The two case studies presented in this paper ouline two sides of the coin concerning inclusive education in regular primary schools. Inclusive education is a human right, thus isolating children with disabilities from their peers based on their difficulties goes against this principle (Ainscow, 2020; Slee, 2019). The implementation of inclusive education requires access, presence, participation, achievement and belonging to regular schools (UNESCO, 2016, 2006). However, placing children with Autism in regular schools does not guarantee inclusion (Slee, 2019).

Concerning Max and Joe, the results of the study showed that interactions between the teacher and the children with Autism involving close contact, tailored support, and collaborative support from SNAs enabled these children participation with their fellow students. A participation that seemed to facilitate the interactions between Max and Joe with their teachers, SNAs and peers. The findings concur with previous literature confirming that interactions between students and teachers promote students' academic, emotional, and social development in school (Pianta et al., 2008; Santos et al., 2016). Other studies found that positive teacher-student interactions facilitate relationships and enable the achievement and motivation of students in schools (Pianta et al., 2012). It has also been demonstrated the importance of teachers' positive interactions in the inclusion of children with Autism in regular schools (Longobardi et al., 2012; Prino et al., 2016).

However, in Max's case, the study revealed limited contact between the child and the teacher, which was generally accompanied by a lack of support and passing of effective responsibility to the SNA. This finding echoed those of other studies, which concluded that teachers tend to spend less time with children with Autism in the classroom, particularly during structured lessons, and that children with Autism spend most of their time with the SNA (Butt, 2016; Webster et al., 2015). This form of support seemed to isolate Max from his teachers' support, thereby limiting Max's participation with their fellow students. It has been demonstrated that

teachers' interactions potentially affect the teaching and learning of pupils, particularly those with disabilities (Rix et al., 2009). In addition, the lack of interactions between teachers and pupils has been confirmed as negatively influencing the academic, social and emotional learning and development of students, including those with disabilities (Goodall, 2018; Hamre et al., 2014; Rose & Shevlin, 2017).

Concerning the role of the SNA, the study findings outlined the impact that the style of their support (from teachers and SNAs) had in these children's interactions and participation with teachers and peers in schools. The findings outlined that when teaching and learning in the classroom, concerning the child with Autism, was constructed in collaboration between teachers and the SNA it enabled support, participation, and further interactions. In the case of Joe, the collaborative support teacher and SNA enabled his participation in the academic and social activities of the classroom, and his interactions with his peers and teacher.

On the contrary, in the case of Max, the level of support provided by the SNA in relation to his teaching and learning, and the use of separated practices for instruction (i.e., work station) inhibited appropriate interactions between Max with teacher and peers. Research has confirmed that educators consider the SNA as an essential asset in regular schools to support the inclusion of children with disabilities (Hemmingsson et al., 2003). However, as outlined in the current research findings, the role and presence of the SNA could imply unintended negative consequences. It appeared that having a close interaction with the SNA, at all levels (academic and social) tended to limit interactions with the teacher and peers, as it occurred in the case of Max.

In regular schools, the social inclusion of children with Autism is considered an essential benefit of education and a key aspect for their parents when deciding on the form of education for their children (Falkmer et al., 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2015). The research findings outlined the positive interactions between Joe and peers in the classroom and playground, that occurred in line with his teacher's interactions in the classroom and, in turn, aligned with her support towards his participation. As found in previous studies, teachers play an essential role in the classroom, and their interaction, behaviours and teaching approach shape the classroom environment and the further interaction taking place in the classroom (Blatchford et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2016). Therefore, the teacher-pupil with autism interactions could act as an example of inclusion for the rest of the students in the classroom. Researchers have also emphasised the importance of placing children with Autism among their peers, since including children with Autism in regular schools enhances their social skills (Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Kasari et al., 2011). Additionally, it facilitates peers' understanding of diversity and acceptance of others regardless of their minority status (e.g., ethnicity, gender and disability) (Calder et al., 2013; Pellicano et al., 2018; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2019). Some other research has shown that in school children with Autism have fewer friends, lower acceptance, and higher risk of bullying the limited reciprocal relationships in school and lower peer acceptance which places them at higher risk of bullying and exclusion from their peers' social networks (Humphrey& Hebron, 2015). However, these studies focused on the diagnostic characteristics of children with Autism as the potential barrier to their limited interactions with their peers (Jones & Frederickson, 2010; Locke et al., 2016). Nonetheless, other researchers have confirmed that teachers' approach to their instruction and their organisation of the contextual accommodations could positively or negatively influence the social interaction between children with disabilities, including children with Autism, and peers (Audley-Piotrowski et al., 2015). In Max's case, it appeared that his teaching and learning approach seemed to place him peripheral to his peers reducing opportunities to interact with his peers, opposing to Joe's case.

The study has its limitations. On the one hand the method of data collection; semi-structured non-participant observation, required the presence of the researcher in the different settings, which can influence all actors' behaviour. In addition, during the observation process the researcher's potential bias could add to the organisation and interpretation of the data due to experience and personal and professional

background (Finkelstein et al., 2021). However, acknowledging the research limitations through self-reflexivity enabled the researcher to approach data collection and analysis rigorously, and prepared the approach to schools (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

In conclusion, this paper presents two contrasting versions of inclusive education in practice in the early years of regular schools. It outlined the faciliators and inhibitors in the inclusion Max and Joe in their schools. The findings of Max and Joe highlighted the complexities of the interactions between these children with Autism, teachers, SNAs and peers in the classroom, the playground, and the support classroom. The key messages from these two cases, strongly supported by previous research, outline that the interconnection between interactions and support towards participation, as it occurs in the case of Joe, appears as a strong candidate to enable inclusive education in all in-school settings. In both cases, their inclusive education seemed to materialise when they were participating alongside their peers during lessons. It appeared that tailored support from the hand of the teacher in collaboration with the SNA to promote learning throughout participation enhanced further interactions between Max and Joe, their teachers, SNAs and peers.

These two cases highlight the importance of the different actors in inclusive education, and how interactions in different formats (dyadic or groups) influence the performance and experience (or not) of inclusion. The cases of Max and Joe outline how the interactions among the participants in all three settings appear to be associated with levels of support and participation, which shed paths that enable and inhibit inclusion. The interconnection of these three dimensions positioned Max and Joe either central to or in the periphery of the group, which appeared as core in the promotion of their inclusion alongside their fellow students, teachers and SNAs.

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