The influence of teacher practice placement on one's beliefs about intellectual disability: a student's reflection

Abstract
Education for people with a disability has changed over the years, moving from a philosophy of integration to inclusion. This philosophy requires a whole school approach spanning issues such as access, opportunities for learning, social experiences and developing a culture of acceptance. While this poses many challenges for individuals, schools and communities, it is a right for all citizens to be educated within their local school in a supportive manner. This article presents a reflection on a teacher practice placement, as through reflecting on one’s experience one can promote desirable practice, develop understanding and learning from one’s experience. To facilitate the reflection Gibbs’ reflective cycle was used, addressing the description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan.

Key words: attitudes, Ireland, intellectual disability, reflection, teacher placement.

Introduction
In the last few decades, the views of special education have changed in all societies. This move has been variously referred to as integration, mainstreaming and, more recently, inclusion (Chhabra et al., 2010). The terms integration and mainstreaming are virtually synonymous, referring to the placement of a student with disability in an ordinary school environment, usually without the curriculum being modified to any great extent (Chhabra et al., 2010). However, facilitating inclusive school environments requires ensuring physical access, the opportunity for optimal learning and social experiences and providing a nurturing climate (Pivik et al., 2002). The ideology of inclusive education is not about segregating students with special needs into special classes and schools but rather about equipping schools to meet the needs of all students. The educational system is responsible for including students with special needs and ensuring appropriate education for all. The idea of inclusion seems to be a major challenge in many countries (Flem and Keller, 2000). This move towards inclusion began tentatively in a few countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but the trend became much more internationally widespread in the 1980s and 1990s. A major factor influencing the rapid worldwide movement towards inclusion was the promulgation of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994).

This statement began with a commitment to education for all, recognising the necessity and urgency of providing education for all children, young people and adults within the regular education system. It states that children with special educational needs must have access to regular schools. Furthermore, it recommends that all students with special needs have full access in regular schools and be taught in classrooms using predominantly adaptable and child-centred pedagogy. This article presents a reflection on a teacher practice placement which was used to promote desirable practice through understanding and learning about the lived experience (Johns, 2004). For the purpose of this reflection
Gibbs’ (1988) reflection cycle has been chosen to structure and present the reflection to the reader.

**Description**
This article is presented from the perspective of the second author, whose reflection was facilitated by the first author. During my four-year training to become a woodwork teacher I covered many modules, theoretical concepts, practical demonstrations, teaching strategies and production of wood materials and products. However, nowhere along my path did I truly consider the aspect of supporting people with a disability in the classroom. During a ten-week teaching practice placement in a school I had the opportunity to work with pupils with disabilities such as Down’s syndrome and autism. The pupils were attending a local school for people with disability but were attending the local post-primary school for certain subjects. It was a unique experience whereby I was able to see first-hand how pupils with disability enjoyed the subject of woodwork and how they interacted with other pupils in the class. This experience required me to reflect on my values and beliefs and how they might have changed as a result of the placement experience.

**Feelings**
Initially when I learned that there would be pupils in my woodwork class with Down’s syndrome and autism I was anxious, for a number of reasons. I felt that I would not be able to manage pupils with a disability as I had very little knowledge of their disability and quite limited experience of interacting with pupils with a disability. This led me to question my own capabilities and current understanding of disability. While I was engaged in teacher training and people with a disability were included in mainstream education it was not an aspect I thought about or had covered during my theoretical learning. My lack of knowledge was a source of frustration and fear and this led me to consider my own thoughts on disability and question my own belief/value system. I was accepting of people with a disability’s rights for inclusion but I still felt ill prepared.

During my thinking I began to realise that my frustration and fear were not regarding ‘disability’ but more to do with how I would meet the needs of the pupils with a disability and support their learning. My feelings of frustration and fear changed to annoyance as I realised that disability was not an issue for me. I realised I was annoyed at myself for coming to this stage of my teacher training and discovering I was not prepared and more importantly had not expected to have to support people with a disability in my class. I began to question whether it was my own lack of preparation or a flaw within the education programme that led me to feel ill prepared. Generally I think we operate for the masses and within my own thoughts and course the aspect of supporting people with a disability was a minute component and something to which additional time needed to be given.

I was also worried that the other pupils in the class might have a negative attitude towards the pupils with a disability and might exclude them. This led me to consider how I could deal with behaviour and the general conduct of the pupils. As a young adult, having only finished post-primary school just over three years previously, I began to feel
apprehensive about assuming a new role and maintaining control and respect for all. This brought me to the realisation that no matter how much I covered in university or read there is nothing like true practical experience where you get to put it all into action. In addition, as a future teacher I was concerned that the lessons I had planned for the woodwork class might not cater for the pupils’ learning needs and that I would be unable to support these needs. I wondered how I could adapt the lesson plans for people with disability. As I did not know the individuals or their abilities this was an impossible task which was further compounded by the fact that I had no real experience of adapting lesson plans for people with disability and I had little to fall back on from my theoretical input. When the pupils came for their woodwork class they were accompanied by a special needs assistant (SNA) and this was a relief to me as I felt I would have an additional resource and support available. The SNA assisted me in supporting the individuals and was a great source of information for me to plan methods that would suit their learning needs. This resource was of great comfort to me as I knew there would be someone to assist me and direct me as they had known the individuals for a period of time.

Evaluation
Once I became aware that there would be pupils with a disability in the class I decided to research the conditions of Down’s syndrome and autism and talk to other teachers who had experience of teaching pupils with a disability. This enabled me to gain advice and identify teaching styles that might work best for pupils with a disability. Referring to the research literature enabled me to develop an understanding of their disability but there was little information from a teaching perspective in post-primary schools. I consulted with a university lecturer in intellectual disability nursing to support my learning and understanding; the lecturer provided me with additional literature and as I read the literature I became more relaxed. When teaching the woodwork class I was quite surprised by the reaction of other pupils towards the pupils with a disability in the class. They seemed to be quite aware of the pupils with a disability and displayed the utmost compassion and willingness to give assistance without having to be asked. I found this to be surprising as I thought the relationship between pupils would be a little awkward and standoffish. But it was quite clear that a friendly accepting atmosphere was in place in the classroom which seemed to be as a result of the classes’ exposure to pupils with a disability. All pupils seemed to be enjoying the lesson and equally enjoyed the social interaction with their fellow pupils. I found after a couple of lessons that I was much more relaxed and the aspect of having a disability was of little concern as I focused more on teaching and enabling the pupils. As there was a great level of acceptance already achieved in the classroom environment it was easier for me to engage with all pupils and support their work. This acceptance was essential for the integration of the pupils with a disability into the class environment and the smooth running of the lesson. One of the most critical elements of making the woodwork lesson both enjoyable and successful for all involved was the involvement and support of the SNA, who worked closely with the pupils with a disability. The SNA provided the pupils with extra assistance and their role was pivotal in giving the pupils with a disability a sense of achievement and accomplishment in their work.
**Analysis**

Internationally the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) called for inclusion to be the norm. Ireland is one of the countries that subscribe to the Salamanca Statement, which recognised the necessity and urgency of providing education for all students, young people and adults within the regular education system. Students with special educational needs must have access to regular schools and schools with this inclusive orientation provide the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all (UNESCO, 1994). The fundamental principle of the inclusive school, as proposed in the Salamanca Statement, is that all students should learn together, where possible, and that ordinary schools must recognise and respond to the diverse needs of their students while also having a continuum of support and services to match those needs. In addition, the Salamanca Conference adopted a new Framework for Action, with its guiding principle that ordinary schools should accommodate all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. The Framework states that all educational policies should stipulate that disabled students should attend the local school that they would attend if they did not have a disability.

Additionally Article 24 of the United Nations International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), under the heading ‘Education’, places a strong obligation on governments to provide inclusive education for all learners. Article 24 states that with a view to realising the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, states shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels. In realising this, states shall ensure that: (a) persons with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary or secondary education on the basis of disability; (b) persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality, free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live; (c) reasonable accommodation of the individual’s requirements is provided; (d) persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education; and (e) effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion (United Nations, 2006).

In Ireland a substantial body of legislation relating to the education of students with special educational needs has been developed. The impetus for this legislation arose from a desire on the part of the community and the Government to assert the rights of children with special educational needs to an education that is appropriate to their needs and to ensure statutory protection for their rights to such an education. The legislation includes the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), the Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland, 2000a) and Equality Act (Government of Ireland, 2004a), the Education (Welfare)Act (Government of Ireland, 2000b), the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004b) and the Data Protection Acts (Government of Ireland, 1988, 2003). These acts provide a statutory basis for education policy and provision by the Department of Education and Science and its agencies in relation to the education of all children, including those with special educational needs.
The legislation also provides the statutory framework for the development of effective structures at national and local level to ensure equality of rights to and equity of provision for students with special educational needs.

Schools and teachers should take cognisance of the provisions of this legislation in relation to developing and implementing policies and practices for special educational needs at a whole school level and the level of the individual student. It is, however, unlikely that legislation by itself will bring about good practice in schools. For this to occur there needs to be availability of the necessary staffing and other resources, an acceptance of the right of students with special educational needs to participate to the fullest possible extent in education and a commitment by schools to making appropriate provision of suitable education for these students. Pitt and Curtin (2004) believe that an appropriate school placement should depend on the physical, academic, psychological, social and emotional abilities and needs of each student. Real inclusion occurs when there is a genuine opportunity for all pupils to participate, to the best of their abilities, in all that school has to offer (Bishop, 2001; Corbett, 2001). Therefore, until this time comes, special schools should continue to coexist so that disabled young people can choose according to their perceived strengths and weaknesses and focus on developing a policy of inclusion (Thomas, 1997; Avramidis et al., 2002).

The ongoing struggles regarding the understanding of inclusion are important, while inclusion has been advocated for children with disability (Helmstetter et al., 1994; Bunch and Valeo, 1997; Hunt and Goetz, 1997) so that they can learn alongside their age-appropriate peers in general education classrooms with appropriate aids and services (Gilhool, 1989). The access and resource limitations of several mainstream secondary schools often result in young disabled people having to move to designated schools that have suitable facilities for disabled people, which can be several miles from their home, while their local non-disabled peers can make a straight transition to their local secondary school (Pitt and Curtin, 2004; Shah, 2005). This is not only tiring for the young disabled person, as they have to travel long distances, but also means that they may be separated socially from friends made at school and peers from their home locality (Shah, 2005). Additionally research has highlighted that, too often, disabled students in secondary schools are being taught almost entirely by teaching assistants who are not fully qualified teachers, while non-disabled students are taught by the teacher (Warnock, 2005). This can result in a tendency for the teaching assistants to isolate the child with a disability from group learning situations (MacBeath et al., 2006). This means there may be very little interaction between the teaching staff and the disabled students, again reinforcing the disabled/non-disabled divide. So there needs to be a focus from schools and classroom teachers on becoming truly inclusive environments with associated values and an inclusive ethos (Beckett, 2009).

A key element in the successful implementation of inclusive education is teachers’ attitudes (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Brandon, 2006), which impact on the success or failure of inclusive schools (Mittler, 2003). However, demographic and contextual variables may also influence teachers’ attitudes towards inclusive education (Harvey, 1992; Avramidis et al., 2000; Van Reusen et al., 2001). Teachers view the inclusion of
students with disabilities in mainstream settings as being difficult and stressful (Whiting and Young, 1995). The availability of support services has consistently been found to be associated with more positive attitudes to inclusion (Janney et al., 1995; Leroy and Simpson, 1996; Wilkins and Nietfeld, 2004; Lambe and Bones, 2006). In contrast, social support has been found to be negatively correlated with teacher burnout in inclusive education; that is, the less social support that the teacher experiences, the higher the level of burnout (Talmor et al., 2005).

As disabled young people and children often require additional facilities and support to function successfully, they are often considered to be disruptive and difficult to educate (Barnes and Mercer, 2010). However, educating students with significant disabilities in mainstream classrooms results in positive changes in educators’ attitudes (Avramidis et al., 2002) and has a role in tackling negative attitudes towards disabled people held by some members of the non-disabled population. Tackling these attitudes is not just an important part of building inclusive school communities that are welcoming and enabling of any disabled child/young person; it is also about shaping the attitudes of non-disabled children as ‘citizens of the future’, and is thus an important part of building inclusive communities and an inclusive society beyond the school gates (Beckett, 2009). A successful inclusive school climate depends on the attitudes and actions of the principal, the teacher, a supportive school community and the shared values and language used. Inclusive efforts on the part of teachers and school staff regarding accommodation, instructional needs and curriculum are needed (Destefano et al., 2001) and supporting teacher training in these areas would improve participation and accommodation efforts, as well as teacher confidence (Destefano et al., 2001).

There may be concern however about teachers’ knowledge for adapting the curriculum to meet diverse learning styles (Hanson et al., 2001) as often teachers feel they have limited training to teach students with such needs (Vaughn et al., 1996; Yuen and Westwood, 2001), and may lack the skill, knowledge and competence to include these students effectively (Avramidis et al., 2000; Chhabra et al., 2010). The majority of teachers are concerned about including students with severe disabilities (Croll and Moses, 2000; Briggs et al., 2002); therefore there is a need for additional support (Cant, 1994) and resources (Kuester, 2000). In addition teachers view the increased need for specialised training and professional support as being critical to the success of inclusive education (Van Reusen et al., 2001; Briggs et al., 2002; Sharma and Desai, 2002; Hammond and Ingalls, 2003), with teacher training playing a role in addressing many of the issues that teachers are facing when it comes to including students with disabilities into their classrooms (Dart, 2006).

**Conclusion**

Looking back now on my placement I feel it has been a highly beneficial and rewarding experience. It has given me a greater awareness of disability and an interest in how pupils with disability engage with others in a classroom environment. In considering the cognitive ability of persons with disability it may not always be possible to support mainstream education; however, a practical subject such as woodwork can help to promote the integration of persons with a disability in post-primary education. This
would be in accordance with the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Government of Ireland, 2004b) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), making provision for the education of people with special educational needs and providing that education in an inclusive environment with those who do not have such needs.

The movement towards more provision for children with disabilities in ordinary schools has been promoted in terms of inclusion rather than integration. This can be seen in the context of wider policies promoting social inclusion, which involve the participation of ‘vulnerable’ members of society in a range of social activities and settings (Norwich, 2008). Inclusion has been promoted as a rights issue and about changing the system, in this case ordinary schools, to make them more accommodating of those who are ‘different’ (Norwich, 2008). Inclusion needs to be seen as more than placing children in ordinary schools without the right kind of accommodation. As inclusion has the connotation of being about social acceptance and instilling a sense of belonging, we need to ‘include all children in the common educational enterprise of learning, wherever they learn best’ (Warnock, 2005, p. 14).

This may indicate some degree of withdrawal to a separate setting as being inclusive in the sense of making it possible for certain children to engage in learning (Norwich, 2007). Facilitating inclusive school environments requires ensuring physical access, the opportunity for optimal learning and social experiences, and providing a nurturing climate (Norwich, 2008). It is clear that there are different and sometimes conflicting notions of inclusion but to engage and develop inclusion we need to include both students and their parents in the evaluation of inclusive school environments and in the planning of new facilities or renovations. Research is needed to examine the experiences of children with disabilities and learning styles. Teachers need to ensure that they have both the knowledge and skills to adapt their teaching to include all children and the willingness to learn about the experiences of children with disabilities. Inclusive education can (for some people) facilitate the establishment of social relationships between disabled and non-disabled peers, as awareness and understanding of disability is said to prompt an increasing acceptance of it (Wertheimer, 1997; Shah, 2005). Moreover, it presents disabled people with a training that is equal to that of their non-disabled counterparts and, therefore, with qualifications to compete with them in the mainstream economic society (Norwich, 2008).

**Action plan**

If this experience were to arise again I feel I would be more confident but I would make more of an effort to meet and engage with the SNA prior to the lesson to establish the needs and abilities of the pupils with disability. Also it would be helpful to meet the pupils with disability prior to the class, to try and get an idea of their expectations and personalities, which would enable me to support them more during classes. Based on my experience working with pupils with disability I have decided to do my research project and final year project (FYP) on the participation and inclusion of pupils with disability in post-primary education. I have found this experience worthwhile, enlightening, rewarding and educational.
References


