Inclusive education for individuals with Down syndrome

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Inclusion in education – the benefits and keys to success

Changes over the past thirty years have brought access to education for children with special needs. In more recent years, there has been slow but steady development of inclusive education for children with Down syndrome. With supportive legislation to help schools provide the resources necessary to meet special educational needs, more children are being educated in their local school settings. Research indicates that appropriate education provided in inclusive settings offers the best opportunities for children with Down syndrome.

Research findings from studies comparing children who have been educated in special schools and classrooms indicate that it is difficult to provide optimal learning environments in such schools or classrooms. One particular study done in 2000 compared the achievements of teenagers of similar ability and family background educated in special schools and mainstream settings. The study showed significant educational benefits for teenagers who had been through mainstream education with 25-30 hours of additional learning support assistance.

The teenagers who had been fully included in mainstream classes showed gains of more than 2 years in spoken language skills and 3 years in reading and writing ability on standardised measures. These measurements of 'years' for typically developing children would equate to 4 and 6 year gains for children with Down syndrome, as they usually progress at about 5 months per year in these measures. In addition, there were gains in maths skills, general knowledge and social independence. There were no differences in personal independence or social contacts out of school between the teenagers educated in special and mainstream classes, and a tendency for the mainstream students to have better behaviour. This study is described in full in "A comparison of mainstream and special education for teenagers with Down syndrome: implications for parents and teachers", by Sue Buckley, Gillian Bird, Ben Sacks and Tamsin Archer, published in *Down Syndrome News and Update*.[1]

Implications of the research on inclusive education

Speech and language gains

Children with Down syndrome who are educated in their mainstream school settings with appropriate support show significant language gains over time, in both structure and clarity. The importance of speech and language development for cognitive and social

development can not be overemphasised. Words and sentences are the building blocks for mental development – we think, reason and remember using spoken language. Words provide the main source of knowledge about the world. Speech and language skills influence all aspects of social and emotional development – the ability to negotiate the social world and to make friends, share worries and experiences and be part of the family and community.

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Access to the curriculum alongside peers

Full inclusion in the curriculum leads to much better literacy and numeracy skills, and general knowledge. The level of supported literacy experience across the curriculum also provides important support for spoken language development.

Optimal learning environment

Children with Down syndrome need to learn with their non-disabled peers with the necessary individual support to make this successful. Research indicates that it is difficult to provide a maximally effective learning environment in a special education classroom. Children learn from their peers so watching and participating in the curriculum alongside their typically developing peer group will provide learning opportunities throughout the day. Expectations in the classroom are higher in mainstream schools. The classroom curriculum is set for the mainstream children and their learning provides role models for literacy and language for the child with Down syndrome.

Friendships

Parents and teachers need to do more to ensure that friendships with non-disabled peers carry on outside of school. An improvement in understanding and support for teenagers and adults with Down syndrome in their homes, workplaces, shops and leisure activities could be one of many positive results from inclusion.

Children with Down syndrome in mainstream schools also need more opportunities to socialise with a peer group of children with similar levels of intellectual disability. This can be achieved by ensuring that children with Down syndrome have friends with similar disabilities in or outside of school.

Supporting inclusion

Although children with Down syndrome have additional educational needs, they also have many of the same needs as the other non-disabled pupils of their age. They will make the most

rapid progress if they are fully socially included and accepted, benefiting from age appropriate role models and from the benefits of feeling that they are part of the ordinary community. This social acceptance will have a profound effect on self-confidence, self-identity and self-esteem – if the whole school community is one that is caring and supportive to all its members.

For achieving successful inclusion in school, the most important predictor of success is staff attitude. The staff must feel positive about inclusion and believe that the child should be in their school.

Whole school responsibilities include:

- valuing diversity
- the importance of positive attitudes and setting the framework for inclusion – understanding why the pupil is in your school, your class, and how the pupil will progress through school
- organising management responsibilities for planning and support systems, including making resources
- proactive involvement of parents, carers, and services
- positive approach to problem-solving.

Planning for the individual child:

- learn about the specific profile and effective interventions for pupils with Down syndrome
- learn about the pupil's understanding, skills and strengths

- learn about the times and situations in the school day that are more difficult to manage successfully – for the pupil, peers and staff
- use the pupil's strengths to support successful learning and development e.g. social strengths, learning with peers
- adapt and plan, as necessary, for the individual – using the curriculum for age peers as your starting point
- be flexible, but also cautious about interventions that do not have a clear rationale/evidence
- share adaptations with partnership services and parents.

Applying the typical profile:

- strengths as visual learners
- learning from listening is difficult
- reducing speech and language demands
- reducing literacy demands – support for reading and recording
- reducing motor demands – mounting work into scrapbooks, increasing text size
- reducing sustained attention demands and building on memory skills
- good awareness of social and emotional cues; use of reward and praise
- good social learners; learning from peers through observation and imitation.

Promoting effective learning skills:

- meaningful activities based on pupil's experience
- visual resources and approaches to aid comprehension of abstract concepts and task demands
- new activities based on existing skills
- small steps with opportunities for practice
- applying skills in different contexts, situations.

Differentiation and individualised learning:

- IEP targets – specific outcomes for the child across different curriculum areas over a short period of time
- Some learning may take place in a 1:1 setting – all children could benefit from some 1:1 time.

(Note that too much individualised learning can reduce exposure to age-appropriate models of behaviour/language and opportunities for student-student interaction. It can lead to social exclusion and the pupil feeling 'different' from the class. It is also very demanding for the pupil and the assistant to work 1:1 for long periods.)

Inclusion will work differently for each school and for each individual child. What works for one may not work for another. A flexible approach needs to be adopted so that successes can be celebrated and changes can be made for those areas where the outcomes were less favourable. As with most things, we can all learn from each others' experiences.

If we wish to make a difference to the life experiences of children and adults with disabilities, all children need to grow and learn together. Neighbours, friends and workmates of adults with disabilities will then have the opportunity to value the person first, to realise that everyone has strengths and weaknesses and that everyone has a contribution to make to a caring society. Developing caring, inclusive communities improves the quality of life of all members of the community.

Reference

1. Buckley, S., Bird, G., Sacks B. and Archer T. (2002). A comparison of mainstream and special education for teenagers with Down syndrome: Implications for parents and teachers. *Down Syndrome News and Update,* 2(2), 46-54, and on downsed information online at http://information.downsed.org/library/periodicals/dsnu/02/2/046/

Recommended reading

Education for individuals with Down syndrome – An overview (2000). Sue Buckley and Gillian Bird. *Down Syndrome Issues and Information*, The Down Syndrome Educational Trust.

Accessing the curriculum – Strategies for differentiation for pupils with Down syndrome (2000). Gillian Bird, Sandy Alton and Cecilie Mackinnon. *Down Syndrome Issues and Information*, The Down Syndrome Educational Trust.

Inclusion and how to do it: Meeting SEN in Primary Classrooms (includes CD) (2004). Sue Briggs. David Fulton Publishers.

Inclusion and how to do it: Meeting SEN in Secondary Classrooms (includes CD) (2004). Sue Briggs. David Fulton Publishers.

First Steps in Inclusion, a handbook for parents, teachers, governors and LEAs (2002). Stephanie Lorenz. David Fulton Publishers.

Index for inclusion – developing learning, participation and play in early years and childcare (2004)*.* Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow*.* Centre of Studies on Inclusive Education.

Index for inclusion – developing learning and participation in schools (2000). Tony Booth, Mel Ainscow, Kristine Black-Hawkins, Mark Vaughan and Linda Shaw. Centre of Studies on Inclusive Education.

*A comparison of mainstream and special education for teenagers with Down syndrome: Implications for parents and teacher*s (2002). Sue Buckley, Gillian Bird, Ben Sacks and Tamsin Archer. *Down Syndrome News and Update,* 2(2), 46-54, and online at http://information.downsed.org/library/periodicals/dsnu/02/2/046/

Additional information

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- Address enquiries to: enquiries@downsed.org
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