

‘Soft barriers’ – The impact of school ethos and culture on the inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools in Ireland

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journals.sagepub.com/home/imp**David Mc Keon**

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Abstract

The use of ‘soft barriers’ to deter students with special educational needs (SEN) from accessing some schools has been reported in the Irish media. This article investigates the influence of ethos and culture on access to and inclusive practice in mainstream schools in Ireland. Ethos and culture are nebulous concepts yet are integral to how schools operate, how they present themselves and how they are perceived by the public. Findings from a small-scale, qualitative research study are used to illustrate this. In the study, the understandings and attitudes of principals, special education teachers and guidance counsellors in mainstream schools in relation to students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) are investigated through the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. In line with international experiences, an argument is presented suggesting that many sections of the education system in Ireland, while seemingly having been irrevocably transformed in response to national policy on inclusion, preserve very traditional structures, organisation and attitudes due to issues of ethos and culture remaining largely unchallenged in the inclusion debate. This phenomenon appears to have greater impact at post-primary level. Cosmetic, surface-level changes impede meaningful, systemic change in terms of access and inclusive practice.

Keywords

Culture, ethos, inclusion, post-primary, primary, social emotional and behavioural difficulties, special educational needs

Introduction

A newspaper article entitled *Schools putting up ‘soft barriers’ to special needs* (Cradden, 2018) provided the catalyst for this article. It raised concerns around the reluctance of some schools to accept students with special educational needs (SEN), due to the impact this may have on their academic reputation. What resonated with this author was a realisation that students were still experiencing such difficulties 25 years after the *Special Education Review Committee (SERC)*

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Report (Department of Education & Science, 1993) which laid the basis for major developments in educational provision for students with SEN but, more importantly, established their rights in this regard (Mac Giolla Phádraig, 2007). This suggests that this phenomenon is more complex than being just ‘reluctance’ and this is not unique to Ireland. The international literature highlights the difficulties experienced by marginalised groups in society to access and navigate through the mainstream education system, identifying complex underlying reasons for their experiences (see, e.g., Magnusson et al., 2018; Slee, 2013, 2019)

In the Irish context, as elsewhere, these reasons often relate to issues of ethos and culture and while Mc Coy et al. (2020) and Canny and Hamilton (2018) have recently alluded to these issues in their research, they remain largely under-researched in Ireland. This article seeks to examine the ramifications of school ethos and culture on the inclusion of students with SEN. It locates Irish experiences in an international context and also refers to specific findings relating to school ethos and culture from a research study conducted by this author that concentrated on the inclusion of students presenting with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) in mainstream schools (for further information on this research, see Mc Keon, 2017).

Since the SERC Report (Department of Education & Science, 1993), successive Irish governments have proactively charted a policy of inclusion in relation to students with SEN, including the enactment of major legislation in this area: Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998), Equal Status Act (Government of Ireland, 2000), and Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN; Government of Ireland, 2004). The EPSEN Act (2004), for example, enshrines the right to be educated in an inclusive environment, although with a caveat included in Section 2(b) in the following extract:

A child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with

- (a) The best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act, or
- (b) The effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established in 2003 to oversee the delivery of education services to students presenting with SEN. Importantly, in 2011, the NCSE drew attention to difficulties being experienced by parents of children with SEN attempting to secure places for them in post-primary schools, the issue highlighted by Cradden’s article 7 years later. In its submission to the discussion on the *Regulatory Framework on School Enrolment*, initiated by the Minister for Education and Skills, it stated,

The Council considers that the current framework does not provide sufficient protection to ensure that ‘soft barriers’ to enrolment are not put in place by schools to ensure that prospective pupils with special educational needs are deterred from applying for enrolment. The Council is aware that schools can use very prescriptive criteria that preclude prospective pupils with special educational needs from applying for enrolment. (p. 3)

These schools present themselves as ‘academic schools’ without the expertise or resources to deal with special educational needs. Parents accept this reality and move to other schools which have a more inclusive ethos. The result is that certain schools are perceived as inaccessible to students with special educational needs and these schools are not held accountable. (p. 3)

Furthermore, the NCSE (2012), in its Policy Advice Paper No. 3 *The Education of Students with Challenging Behaviour arising from Severe Emotional Disturbance/Behavioural Disorders*, recommended that all schools be ‘obliged to enrol children with EBD who live among the usual cohort of students admitted to the school’ (p. 82), suggesting issues of access permeated the entire education system. Recent legislation has been enacted (Government of Ireland, 2018) to address issues of this nature regarding the enrolment of students with SEN.

Context

Ownership and control of schools in Ireland are complex issues. The Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937) obliges the State to ‘provide for’ education (Article 42). This has resulted in successive Irish governments not being obliged to provide a direct educational service to the population and, as a result, very few primary schools and less than half of all post-primary schools are owned and controlled directly by the State (Coolahan, 1981; NCSE, 2016; Walsh, 2016). The vast majority of schools, however, are publicly funded and are required to accept students with SEN to comply with equality legislation. Banks and Mc Coy (2017) report a dramatic increase in the numbers of students with SEN attending mainstream schools since the EPSSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004). Schools are not legally permitted to select students at the point of entry. This article focuses on the willingness of some schools to accept students with SEN, the means by which some students are discouraged from seeking access to these schools and the reality of students’ experiences in school.

The primary school sector is predominantly controlled by denominational patrons (of which 95% are Roman Catholic). Management structures are largely uniform across this sector, with boards of management being answerable to the patrons. In the post-primary sector, structures that were established from the mid-19th century have led to the existence of three sub-sectors, traditionally catering for different sectors of society and, subsequently, providing different outcomes for their students (Coolahan, 1981; NCSE, 2016; Walsh, 2016). A description of these sub-types is relevant to the issues of ethos and culture.

The largest cohort, called secondary schools (52.6% of a total of 711 post-primary schools, Department of Education & Skills, 2018), has traditionally been seen as providing an ‘academic’ education (Walsh, 2016), with their students progressing on to higher education and/or the professions. Similar to primary schools, they are controlled by religious patrons. These secondary schools were fee-paying up to the introduction of free post-primary education in 1967 (Coolahan, 1981), therefore catering exclusively for those socioeconomic groups who could afford them. Schools under the control of the regional Education and Training Boards (ETBs), representing 33.9 percent (Department of Education & Skills, 2018), were originally established to provide vocational training leading to apprenticeships and employment in trades (Clarke, 2016). Finally, 96 (13.5%) community or comprehensive schools (C&C; Department of Education & Skills, 2018) were established from the 1970s in response to the introduction of free post-primary education, the subsequent requirement for more school places and also to provide for a more broad-based educational experience (Walsh, 2016).

Post-primary education is divided into two cycles. The Junior Cycle comprised 3 years (12–15 years approx.) leading to the Department of Education and Skills (DES)-sponsored Junior Certificate examination. This is succeeded by the Senior Cycle, of 2 or 3 years’ duration (15–18 years approx.), which includes an optional Transition Year followed by a 2-year programme leading to the Leaving Certificate examination (Department of Education & Skills, 2019). Three separate Leaving Certificate programmes are available, namely the long-established Leaving Certificate Programme with an academic focus, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme,

introduced in 1994 to broaden the scope of the traditional programme by including a focus on self-directed learning, innovation and enterprise, and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Programme, introduced in 1995. It is described as meeting the needs of students for whom the two previous programmes do not adequately cater. It is seen largely as a preparation for entering employment, apprenticeships or further education on completion and is unique in the Senior Cycle as it does not offer direct entry into higher education (Department of Education & Science, 2001). This option is popular with students presenting with SEN who stay on at school following the Junior Cycle (Banks et al., 2014; Rose et al., 2015) but is only offered by 40 percent of all post-primary schools (Banks et al., 2014). Only 28 percent of secondary schools offer the LCA, compared to 49 percent of ETB schools and 65 percent of C&C schools (Department of Education & Skills, 2018).

Literature review

What are school ethos and school culture?

The terms ‘ethos’ and ‘culture’ are often used synonymously. This suggests a widespread understanding of their meanings which is unwarranted (Bragg & Manchester, 2017; Donnelly, 2000; Graham, 2012; Solvason, 2005). In relation to ethos, Donnelly (2000) identifies two broad viewpoints. First, ethos can be seen ‘a formal expression of the authorities’ aims and objectives for an organisation’ (p. 135). Second, ethos can derive from a process of social interaction, depending heavily on the day-to-day interactions between the people operating within the organisation rather than on any formal statement made by those in authority.

‘Culture’ refers more to the internal workings of an organisation. Schein (1992) outlines several layers of organisational culture in terms of values, expected norms of behaviours and so on which can influence the actions and patterns of behaviour of those in the organisation. In a school, this might refer to the culture of the classroom, the level and quality of collaborative practices among teaching staff, listening to the voice of students and so on, and this also has a basis in the literature (Bragg & Manchester, 2017; Davies & Ryan, 2014; Learoyd-Smith, & Daniels, 2014; Mowat, 2009; Prunty et al., 2012; Solvason, 2005). Furner and Mc Culla (2018) refer to school culture as relating to a more informal social dimension, which exists in the context of the school’s values and beliefs. Equally, it can refer to the culture of schooling as opposed to the culture of the home or of the environment at large and this is relevant to this article.

Understandings and interpretations of the concepts involved in school ethos and culture may be influenced by a wide variety of issues (Faupel, 2013; Tew & Park, 2013). These include the historical provenance of a school, the perspective of its patron, its board of management, personal and professional belief systems, what is considered to be of value in education and how educational success is measured. While school ethos and culture are nebulous concepts, they are important in the context of the influence they exert on the public face of a school, its reputation, how it is regarded in its own community and nationally and, finally, perceived success in achieving its goals (Hatton, 2013). Neither should the influence exerted by ethos and culture on the internal workings and environment of a school be ignored.

In the Irish post-primary sector, as elsewhere, a school’s reputation is very much dominated by its success in the number of students who progress to higher education, where places are limited. So important is this that it is reported annually in the national print media (see, for example, Flynn, 2012; The Sunday Times, 2018). This phenomenon is replicated internationally (Kearney & Kane, 2006) with some reports of students not being allowed to sit examinations if they may deflate a school’s results (Searle, 2001). Since the introduction of national policies promoting the inclusion of students

presenting with SEN in mainstream schools in Ireland (see, for example, the EPSEN Act, 2004), a similar conflict to that experienced internationally (Kearney & Kane, 2006) has emerged between the obligation and/or desire on the part of schools to be inclusive, welcoming all students and the desire of some schools to remain consistent with their traditional ethos or culture of focusing on the preparation of students for transfer to higher education. This traditional ethos or culture would be identified historically with the secondary school cohort more so than with schools in the ETB or C&C sectors. The NCSE (2011) highlights the difficulties experienced by students and parents in gaining access to schools and the over-concentration of students presenting with SEN in particular schools, for example, to access the LCA programme. It links these difficulties to the reluctance of some schools to accept increasing numbers of students whose presence, due to their perceived profiles of learning difficulties, might impact negatively on that traditional academic focus.

This raises challenging issues for schools as it presents a conflict of conscience involving the extent to which they are willing to support the inclusion of students whose presence might conflict with ideas, structures, organisation and so on that have traditionally been considered important to its status, its ethos or its identity. This conflict is discussed in the literature (Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010; Slee 2019). Slee (2019, p. 6) quoting Tomlinson (1985, p. 157) posits

The dilemma was, and remains, do schools restructure education to ‘deal with increasing numbers of young people who are defined as being unable or unwilling to participate satisfactorily in a system primarily directed towards producing academic and technical elites’?

In particular, it affects and is affected by the degree to which a particular school espouses an ‘academic’ ethos or culture, to which Cradden (2018) alluded. This concept is often referred to anecdotally in Ireland, describing a school as always having been an ‘academic’ school (see NCSE, 2011). In the post-primary sector, this manifests itself in stakeholders’ shared aims of satisfactory results in terminal examinations and transfer to higher education. It finds its origins in the historical development of post-primary schools outlined above and, in particular secondary schools, was identified by the NCSE (2011) as presenting difficulties for students with SEN in accessing post-primary schools.

The internal workings and environment of a particular school are also subject to the influence of ethos and culture. In this regard, Davies and Ryan (2014), Flynn et al. (2013) and Prunty et al. (2012) attest to the importance of student voice, especially of those with SEBD, not only in retaining students in school but also in understanding how to respond to their learning needs. The promotion and continuation of an inclusive environment is dependent on the presence of ‘a critical mass of influential members of staff’ (Cole et al., 2012, p. 187) willing to listen to students’ voice. In this article, this particular issue relates to students with SEN who have successfully managed to negotiate access to a school and relates to the experiences that students will have on a daily basis in the classroom, the quality of inclusiveness in the environment of the school, and the degree to which the ethos and culture of the school actively value and promote the best interests of all students. These issues are integral to the promotion of a positive experience and engagement of students with SEN following transition to the post-primary sector (Mc Coy & Banks, 2012; Smyth, 2016). These issues are taken up next.

Ethos, culture, and inclusion: The dilemma of systemic change

The issue of school ethos and culture is pertinent to wider debates on inclusive education and, more broadly, on inclusion. Educational research tends to focus on the practicalities of inclusive education, investigating what makes education more or less inclusive, for example, exploring

pedagogical practice, assessment, organisation, policy issues or curriculum. The concept of inclusion relates to and requires consideration from a broader societal perspective (Abawi et al., 2018). Definition is elusive and hence the concept remains nebulous. This author's position is influenced by Slee (2019) who presents a view that inclusion is 'an operational value and organising practice that must be placed as a key indicator of educational accountability and success' (p. 9). Central to this is the principle of 'belonging' and it is this principle that necessitates a consideration of ethos and culture in the promotion of meaningful inclusion in schools. The impact of leadership is significant in how successful a school will be in addressing these often conflicting issues. Hogan and Coote (2014) discuss the influence exerted by those in senior management roles in embedding desired values and expectations into the culture of an organisation which, in turn, shapes the behaviours of all its members.

A substantial literature discusses the dichotomy between the efforts made by schools to be inclusive on one hand while, on the other hand, being cognisant of the expectations of stakeholders, the school's identity and its status (Booth et al., 1997; Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010; Slee, 2019). Following the development of the National Curriculum in England and Wales on foot of the Education Reform Act (Department of Education & Science, 1988), for example, and the structural changes in funding and control of schools between the 1970s and 1990s (Booth et al., 1997), it was argued that these developments encouraged parents to identify schools that focused on attainment. As a result, schools felt under pressure to be seen to focus on attainment even when this might result in not accepting students who might jeopardise this image. Hanko (2003) refers to

... the exclusion tide that followed the introduction of the National Curriculum with its contentious league tables and routine testing. The excessively competitive academic results-centred teaching climate to which it led resulted in academic failure and disaffection for some. (p. 126)

Conflicting views develop regarding the purpose of schools, which clientele they should serve and whose needs are being or should be met (Kearney & Kane, 2006; Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010; Slee, 2019). Paliokosta and Blandford (2010) investigate these conflicts and highlight a dilemma for schools and practitioners:

As long as the inflexibility of the National Curriculum prevails and the accountability that follows this becomes an end in itself, it is difficult for practices and discourses around inclusion to be owned by practitioners. (p. 180)

The Elton Report, *Discipline in Schools* (Department of Education & Science, 1989), summed up this dilemma succinctly:

Our evidence suggests that an emphasis on academic achievement is likely to promote good behaviour as long as it is not the school's only emphasis. A school in which academic achievement is the only source of positive encouragement is likely to experience more difficulties with low achieving pupils. (p. 107)

Such conflicts also exist in the Irish context where, as outlined earlier, the right to be educated in an inclusive environment enshrined in the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) is, in fact, a qualified right. This caveat curtailing the rights of students with SEN is not unique to Irish legislation (Slee, 2013). The balancing of rights implicit in Section 2(b) has ramifications for students presenting with issues or learning difficulties which might be perceived as affecting 'the effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated' (Government of Ireland, 2004), for example, students presenting with SEBD. Such perceptions emanate from the understandings of

these issues that are present in schools and among practitioners and are addressed later. They are also inexorably linked to and are influenced by attitudes and structures that are integral to the ethos and culture of schools and, fundamentally, exist at a deep-rooted systemic level.

Systemic change is difficult to achieve. Slee (2019) discusses the difficulties of promoting inclusion and belonging in schools in a system where social exclusion is engrained. In Ireland, research examines what has been achieved at a systemic level in efforts to establish a truly inclusive educational experience for students (NCSE, 2016; Rose & Shevlin, 2004; Shevlin et al., 2002; Shevlin & Rose, 2008). Shevlin et al. (2002), for example, find little evidence of systemic planning to support inclusive practice in mainstream schools for students with disabilities. Kinsella and Senior (2008) suggest that the many substantial advances that have been made to accommodate students with SEN are largely superficial and represent an approach that is integrationist rather than being truly inclusive. The NCSE Research Report (NCSE, 2016) *A Study of the Experiences of Post-Primary Students with Special Educational Needs* exemplifies this in reporting students' mixed experiences, feeling that some teachers had difficulties understanding their learning needs and their social and emotional needs even in a milieu where useful support was being offered. Systemic level changes require addressing ethos and culture as these concepts permeate the fabric of a school and its *raison d'être*.

Murphy (2008) addresses this issue of systemic change when discussing cultural and organisational aspects of schools that impact on disaffection with school and the effects these aspects can have on student retention. He suggests that students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are ill-served by the organisational structures and academic focus of schools, which will impede their progress through the education system. These variables are closely connected to ethos and culture and are also important in developing a sense of belonging in students. Sills-Jones (2012) describes the important influence of school culture in nurturing a sense of belonging, an issue taken up by Smyth (2017) when investigating transition from primary to post-primary and the importance of social relationships and student–teacher relationships in particular.

Methodology

The research study reported here focused particularly on the impact and influence of several variables on the understanding of and responses to SEBD in mainstream schools in Ireland. It is relevant to this article as it provides an illustration of how ethos and culture impact on the inclusion of students who are marginalised by virtue of their SEN. Data were generated using a qualitative approach which was in line with the underlying social constructivist framework inherent in the study. The relevant variables were gender, school population (single gender/co-educational) and also school ethos and culture. A cohort of 17 types of schools was identified on the basis of the following criteria:

- Primary
- Post-Primary: Secondary; ETB; Community & Comprehensive (C&C)
- Single gender – co-educational
- Large–small schools
- Urban–rural schools.

Two exemplars of each type were chosen, thus 34 schools in total. Purposive sampling procedures (Cohen et al., 2011) were employed and an initial questionnaire was sent to the principals ($n=34$), special education teachers ($n=34$) and guidance counsellors ($n=24$, in post-primary schools only), thus 92 respondents ($n=92$) in all, targeting key staff in the delivery of support to students

Table 1. Profile of questionnaire respondents.

	Principals	SEN teachers	Guidance counsellors	Totals (<i>n</i> = 47)
Primary	6 (12.8%)	4 (8.5%)	N/A ^a	10 (21.3%)
Post-primary	13 (27.7%)	15 (31.9%)	9 (19.2%)	37 (78.8%)
Total responses	19 (40.4%)	19 (40.4%)	9 (19.2%)	47 (100%)

SEN: special educational needs.

^aThis position does not exist in primary schools.

Table 2. Profile of interviewees.

Sector	Principals	SEN teachers	Guidance counsellors	Total (<i>n</i> = 17)
Primary	2	2	NA	4
Post-primary	3	6	4	13
Total	5	8	4	17

SEN: special educational needs.

presenting with SEN. Questions focused on stakeholders' involvement in the development of behaviour policy, its influence on behaviour management, definitions of SEBD and respondents' perceptions of the level of influence of a variety of factors on how their school supported and responded to students with SEBD. A response rate of 51.65 percent was achieved (*n* = 47), of which principals (*n* = 19), special education teachers (*n* = 19) and guidance counsellors (*n* = 9). The gender profile was 53 percent female and 47 percent male. Table 1 outlines the profile of respondents.

This was followed by semi-structured interviews (*n* = 17), of which principals (*n* = 5), teachers (*n* = 8) and guidance counsellors (*n* = 4), from those who had returned the questionnaire and had agreed to be interviewed. The profile of interviewees is outlined in Table 2.

Initial organisation of data from the questionnaires was structured around the following criteria: size of school, school sector, type of respondent, school population (single gender/co-ed), location (urban/rural), information about the school's behaviour policy, supports for students with SEBD and definitions of SEBD. Based on this structure, the data were interrogated to explore the influence of a range of factors on the respondents' understanding of and attitudes towards SEBD and support provisions in their schools. These factors included gender of teachers and students, the range of stakeholders involved with students with SEBD in a school and ethos and culture. Issues and themes that emerged were broadly categorised as follows:

- The differences to be found across different categories of respondents and from different types of schools.
- The formulation and content of behaviour policies: for example, rationale, consideration of SEN and SEBD, amount of detail, links to other school policies, level of awareness of the policy, who contributed to the policy.
- How SEBD was defined.

These issues and themes were then investigated in greater depth in the semi-structured interviews, from which the resultant data were subjected to a process of inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Guest et al., 2012), which identified five broad themes as follows:

- Issues relating to the level of knowledge regarding SEN and SEBD
- Issues relating to influences from outside the school
- The individual student as the central focus
- Gender issues
- Issues relating to the development of policy.

Findings

This section presents the findings from this small-scale qualitative study that are pertinent to the issues of ethos and culture. In this context, the findings identified within the five themes outlined above are restructured to reflect a concentration on ethos and culture.

Before continuing it is appropriate at this point to discuss the limitations of the study. First, it is important to acknowledge that being a small-scale study, the sample is small and hence the results are not generalisable. However, it does not follow that the findings are insignificant. Being qualitative in nature, the intention is to elicit the views of a representative sample using purposive sampling techniques and this was achieved. Second, the nature of the issues investigated and the qualitative nature of the investigation preclude the establishment of definitive factual statements; rather the study identifies and discusses positions on and responses to a complex set of factors that are at play in the Irish context. Finally it is important to acknowledge the absence of the voice of students in the data from this study. This was excluded purely for ethical and pragmatic reasons and represents an area where further research might be conducted.

Respondents' knowledge of SEN and how this impacts on their consideration of students

Respondents reflect a tendency to feel comfortable with discussing SEN in a very general way, suggesting they consider themselves to have an understanding of the concept. In relation to SEBD, there is a high level of consistency across all respondents in their focus on factors emanating from within the individual when asked to define SEBD, for example, assessed conditions, learning difficulties, social/emotional characteristics. There is a lack of consideration of environmental factors that are extraneous to the individual and, when mentioned, such factors tend only to refer to home or community-based issues, for example '... and I think myself from talking to special needs teachers and talking to the chaplain, whatever, that a lot of those are brought in from outside'. The issue of the impact of the school-based environment is rarely considered. This suggests a disconnect between how schools engage with students with SEN and the overall school identity, including ethos and culture.

The data suggest a lack of sophistication in how respondents consider students with SEN. In relation to accommodating students with SEN in policy development, one respondent states, '... so, yes, it is a 'one-size-fits-all', it is a homogeneous group'. Rather than considering individual characteristics, they refer to an identifiable cohort of students as 'special needs students' who share ill-defined characteristics that are considered to make it difficult for them to conform to standards laid down for the majority of students, be they standards relating to curricular issues, behaviour or other issues. For example, one teachers states, '... obviously students with special educational needs are nearly by nature, very kind'. This necessitates the provision of resources to 'support' them, including supplementary teaching, emotional support and monitoring to enhance their integration into the school.

Paradoxically, the data also suggest a consideration of the individual student; however, this manifests itself very differently in the primary and post-primary sectors and is more visible in the former. In the primary sector, this is expounded in a positive sense in the concept of 'child-centredness',

where the student is seen as the central point around which every aspect of provision is viewed. Respondents from the post-primary sector focus on individual characteristics in particular circumstances only, that is, they are conscious of being flexible in how they interpret and apply behaviour policy in relation to individuals when the need arises; however, little consideration is afforded to the initial suitability of the behaviour policy from the perspective of students with SEN.

The level of importance attributed to teaching appropriate or acceptable behaviours

The emphasis on causal factors of SEBD emanating predominantly from within the student or from environments outside the school situation impacts on the extent to which schools are proactive in teaching what they perceive to constitute appropriate behaviours. Sectoral differences are apparent in the data. References to the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme (National Council for Curriculum & Assessment, 1999) appear in the primary sector, suggesting a recognition that it is within this framework that primary schools engage in teaching and promoting appropriate behaviours. The data suggest a wide range of largely reactive responses to behavioural issues in the post-primary sector, suggesting a lack of 'joined up thinking' in these schools. References to the SPHE programme are minimal in post-primary schools, even though it is an integral component of the post-primary Junior Cycle curriculum. Indeed, the data appear to suggest that, in most instances, students are not hugely supported in any really structured way in the post-primary sector with regard to the teaching and learning of appropriate behaviours. There appears to be an expectation that all students should have the ability to comply with behaviour policies; interventions only occur when non-compliance is identified.

The position of guidance counsellors in post-primary schools vis-à-vis students with SEN

The interface between guidance counsellors and students with SEN in the post-primary sector was also interrogated in the data. Their role includes supporting and empowering students to address behavioural issues and to develop coping strategies (Department of Education & Skills, 2013). The responses from the guidance counsellors interviewed appear to suggest that their position is in some way peripheral to the students presenting with SEN in schools and particularly those with SEBD. Responses from principals and teachers supported this position. Indeed, guidance counsellors expressed a desire not to be involved with these students lest they be perceived to be responsible for behaviour management issues. One respondent stated

... There was a very strong argument made that we shouldn't link the two together too closely, in that the view of the student might be seen then that the counsellor was to do with only behavioural issues.

External counselling services, for example, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), rather than the on-site guidance counsellor, are referred to frequently. This confirms the notion of students with SEN being segregated from the mainstream student population and not having the same supports available.

The public image of the school

When asked how they consider their school presents itself to the public, significant differences can be identified between primary and post-primary respondents. In the former, respondents indicated their schools presented themselves as 'caring', 'inclusive' and 'child-centred'. Looking

at the post-primary sector, the data indicate that while some post-primary respondents used the terms 'caring' and 'inclusive', this was not as evident as in the primary sector. Several respondents from secondary schools described their schools as presenting themselves as having 'an academic focus'. This contrasts starkly with the fact that no other respondent from other post-primary sectors who responded (ETB, C&C) used this term.

Post-primary respondents displayed a tendency to focus more on how the school believes it is perceived by the public rather than how it presents itself, in contrast to the primary sector. This suggests a reactive engagement with the public, responding to how the school feels it is being perceived by the public rather than taking a proactive approach presenting a public image based on what the school itself might consider important. The apprehension of being compared with other post-primary schools is evident here, resulting in an inclination to comply with what is perceived to be expected from a post-primary school, for example, high rates of transfer to higher education, rather than highlighting other aspects of achievement such as successful inclusive policies.

Discussion

Several issues emerge from the findings that demonstrate how the perpetuation of a school's ethos and culture compromises the development of truly inclusive environments. This concurs with international research (Davies & Ryan, 2014; Kearney & Kane, 2006; Slee, 2013) which reports similar findings. This either creates 'soft barriers' to inhibit access (NCSE, 2011) and/or effectively creates parallel structures to accommodate students with SEN that minimise challenges to the existing and long-standing focus of schools and can inhibit students' progression in schools (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). This is achieved in a variety of ways, some of which relate to structural and organisational issues that are very visible, while others are more subliminal in that they occur at the levels of knowledge and attitudes inherent in the mind sets of significant stakeholders in schools. This compromises greatly the development of meaningful inclusion.

The findings reflect a strong tendency to identify a recognisable cohort of students with SEN in a school, which is achieved by focusing on labelling students with different categories of SEN, for example, autism, social/emotional difficulties, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) and behavioural difficulties. This practice allows for that cohort to be considered separately or 'other than' the main school population and therefore not challenging the long-established public image or reputation of the school, its ethos and culture. The international literature identifies similar practice (Slee, 2013). Parallel structures can therefore be established to accommodate students with SEN while minimising changes to its existing structures and organisation (Banks & Mc Coy, 2017). In Ireland, one example of this has been the increase in the numbers of special classes in mainstream schools with their provision being seen as effectively the only suitable placement for students in particular categories of SEN. While this largely concerns students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the primary sector, at post-primary level, special classes are provided for a much more diverse population (Banks & Mc Coy, 2017).

This segregation of students with SEN from the mainstream population allows schools to present themselves as being inclusive in that they welcome students with SEN, while it perpetuates the long-established ethos and culture supported by the main stakeholders in the school (Donnelly, 2000). This impacts significantly on the level of genuine inclusion being achieved in schools. It permits a school to decide which students will be accepted and thus retain control over access, which is crucial to the continuation of its ethos and culture (Kearney & Kane, 2006). The school can decide the curriculum to be followed and the level of access, if any, to mainstream classes and State certification, thus not impinging greatly on long-standing practices considered integral to the school's main aims (Kearney & Kane, 2006). The cumulative, negative effect exerted by these

internal practices on efforts to initiate deep, meaningful change in schools is substantial (Kinsella & Senior, 2008; Shevlin et al., 2002; Slee, 2013). It appears that inclusion can go so far, but not far enough so as to change substantially the school's ethos and culture.

With regard to the definition of SEBD, the findings identify a level of resignation among respondents focusing on assessed conditions (e.g., attention deficits, conduct disorders) and socio-economic factors outside the school's influence, both of which locate the causes of presenting characteristics either within students or within settings other than the school. This concurs with research elsewhere (Hatton, 2013). By extension, as found by Solvason (2005) and Donnelly (2000), this is presented as compromising the effectiveness of any school-based interventions or influence and justifies the maintenance of the status quo regarding policies, structures and organisation, all of which are essential to the ethos and culture of a school. This position precludes the necessity to consider the school environment (including ethos and culture) as being an agent in the causation of these difficulties and effectively legitimizes the perpetuation of the status quo (Searle, 2001). This also promotes a feeling of benevolence towards students with SEN, which acts to lower expectations of these students and thus not impinge on the higher expectations held for the majority of students. Hence, the school's reputation as an 'academic' school is not threatened (Hatton, 2013; Kearney & Kane, 2006).

A third issue that emerges from the findings identifies sectoral differences between primary and post-primary schools, relating to how schools interact with their students. Respondents from the primary sector report that a culture of 'child-centredness' permeates all decision-making and interaction with students; the premier consideration is how the individual student can be facilitated or will be affected. This manifests itself, for example, in a focus on teaching appropriate behaviours, adopting a proactive positive behaviour approach and so on, particularly through the SPHE programme (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; Davies & Ryan, 2014). In the post-primary sector, a different picture emerges. Here, rather than placing the individual student at the centre of decision-making, the focus is centred more on the cohort of students with SEN as a whole and how they interact with the policies, procedures and organisational structures of the school. In this top-down approach compliance is important, with an emphasis on re-establishing the status quo through an expectation that the student should comply with the prevailing norms linked to the school's ethos and culture.

These sectoral differences are indicative of and integral to the over-arching ethos, cultural and organisational structures inherent in each sector. The expectations placed on students in each sector are different due to the age range of students, the level of maturity and independence expected from students and how they navigate the school's organisational structures. They are influenced and informed by the long-standing ethos and culture of the particular sector and also of the type of school in question. Slee (2019) along with Paliokosta and Blandford (2010) highlights the significance of the tensions that develop on how schools balance the inclusive agenda while maintaining the desired ethos and culture.

Also impacted by these tensions are the experiences students with SEN will have in their efforts to navigate their progress through school, as identified in the international literature (Kearney & Kane, 2006; Slee, 2019). The significance of how schools engage with students individually is central to the promotion of a truly inclusive environment (Davies & Ryan, 2014; Flynn et al., 2013; Prunty et al., 2012; Smyth, 2016). The primary sector's culture is traditionally more open to being supportive in this regard, whereas the post-primary sector struggles with its own inexperience in responding to a much more diverse student profile than heretofore, in the context of long-established structures, expectations and culture. This inexperience at post-primary level in Ireland is apparent from the findings regarding the reported ambiguity of the involvement of guidance counsellors with students with SEN. Their official role includes supporting individual students with

personal and behavioural issues; however, their actual involvement in this function remains tentative and ill-defined. Cooper and Jacobs (2011) refer to ‘the toxicity of certain often taken for granted practices in schools and the historical tendency to neglect the social and personal needs of the most vulnerable students’ (pp. 60–61).

A further issue identified in the findings relates to the public image of a school and the significance of its influence on inclusive practice. This issue is prominent in the international literature (Booth et al., 1997; Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010; Slee, 2019). Hanko’s (2003, p. 126) reference to the ‘excessively competitive academic results-centred teaching climate’ is evidenced in the Irish context by the obsession with reporting schools’ transfer rates to higher education (Flynn, 2012; The Sunday Times, 2018). The findings indicate sectoral differences across primary and post-primary but also within the post-primary sector. While schools across both sectors value their academic ‘credentials’ in the public domain, the notion of presenting itself as ‘academic’, in line with its long-standing ethos and culture, continues to be a distinctive characteristic of the secondary school sector, more so than primary schools and other types of post-primary schools. Schools struggle with the dilemma of responding to official government policy reinclusion on one hand while maintaining the ethos and culture of being ‘academic’ schools as expected and demanded by stakeholders (Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010). This has resulted in a largely superficial engagement with inclusive practice which has left unchallenged the structures and practices that can be associated with the traditional ethos and culture of many schools (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011), and this is particularly the case in the post-primary sector in Ireland.

Concluding remarks

This article has discussed the debilitating impact that ethos and culture can have on the promotion of inclusive practice in schools and locates this in an international context. Using evidence from a small-scale research study focusing on students with SEBD, the article discusses the erection of ‘soft barriers’ that impede students’ access to and the development of deep systemic change in some schools as ways in which ethos and culture can impede effective inclusion of students with SEN. It is suggested that, in common with the international experience, a long-standing culture of promoting an ‘academic’ ethos is integral in Irish schools and, in particular, in sections of the post-primary sector. However, the evidence presented here also indicates that inclusive practice has started to take root in the primary sector, suggesting that this sector has evolved and has begun to embrace inclusive practice at a systemic level. This is in contrast to the post-primary sector, where meaningful change is patchy, and some schools, particularly in the secondary school cohort, remain compliant with their long-established ethos and culture, public perception and some stakeholders’ views of how far and how quickly inclusive practice should advance.

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