

Special Education Support Service: Challenging Behaviour Update

This brief article outlines the current work of the Special Education Support Service in supporting special schools in the prevention and management of challenging behaviour.

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BACKGROUND

When the Special Education Support Service (SESS) was established in September 2003, four priority areas were quickly identified. Arising from the publication of task force reports in 2001, autism and dyslexia were prioritised as areas where teachers would benefit from accessing continuing professional development. Inclusion of students with special educational needs at second-level was also regarded as a high priority area. The fourth area that was prioritised was the management of challenging behaviour in special education settings, as it was felt that this was an area that needed to be addressed in a systematic way.

The first step in the process for the SESS was to host a consultative meeting involving representatives from the Inspectorate (Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland), colleges of education and third-level institutions and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). From this group emerged a core SESS design team. The design team, comprising representatives from the Department of Education and Science (DES), colleges/third-level institutions and the SESS, monitors content and design of seminars. A 'Management of Challenging Behaviour' team of Associate Members was selected to design and deliver appropriate in-service support in this area. In November 2004 a consultative conference was held for principals of all special schools. A very full attendance and animated debate on the day served to indicate the grave concern in schools and the level of difficulty being experienced in relation to the management of challenging behaviour. A second consultative conference was held in February 2005 where the views of in-service providers and key agencies were sought. Both these conferences helped to guide the SESS in setting out a strategy for its future work with special schools.

SPECIAL SCHOOLS – STAFF DEVELOPMENT

In the current school year, SESS targeted the thirty schools that cater for pupils with mild general learning disabilities. Phase 1 of the initial 'in-school' support consisted of a 2-hour whole-staff introductory seminar for each of these schools, entitled: ***Preventing and Managing Challenging Behaviour: A Whole-School Approach***. The key theme of this seminar was the need for a whole-school approach to the prevention and management of challenging behaviour. This seminar allowed schools the opportunity to assess current practice in the school and to look at what further work might be needed in this area.

Phase 2 of the support involved each of these schools being allocated a full day's in-service as a follow-up to Phase 1. The title of this one-day seminar was, ***Preventing and Managing Challenging Behaviour: Strategies and Skills for the Classroom***. The focus for this day was very much on practical suggestions that can help to make a positive difference for each classroom situation. The emphasis in this seminar was on school staff working with pupils to create a positive learning environment and a 'democratic classroom' where pupils learn to be responsible for their own behaviour. Among the key themes of the seminar were:

- the importance of consistency and predictability in dealing with pupils who have special educational needs and who may display challenging behaviour;

- the importance of staying calm and being positive when challenging situations do arise;
- the need to teach pupils a range of skills and strategies so that they can self-manage their own behaviour to the greatest extent possible.

This seminar drew ideas from both academic and practical sources, including Rogers (2002; 2004), Hewett (1998), Westwood (2003), Janis-Norton (2004) and Gordon (1996), as well as teachers' own experiences in the classroom. These one-day seminars took place between March and June of 2006, and these schools will be able to seek further ongoing support in the implementation of policies, strategies and skills as they see fit. It is envisaged that schools will use the material presented on this day to build on their own problem-solving skills on an ongoing basis, and SESS have also provided a Resource Bank to schools to help them with this work beyond the one-day seminar.

SUMMER COURSES

Parallel to this work, SESS is also co-ordinating a series of Summer Courses for another cohort of special schools – those that have to deal with serious and persistent challenging behaviour on a day-to-day basis. In collaboration with the Education Centre network, SESS is providing funding to enable each of these schools to identify and to access whole-staff training in relation to the prevention and management of severe challenging behaviour. This process is ongoing at present as schools work towards planning these Summer Courses.

It is envisaged that SESS will be able to provide support by way of whole-staff seminars and whole-staff summer courses to all special schools, including those not catered for in this year's programme. Schools may also make contact with SESS at any stage around specific concerns they may have in relation to challenging behaviour.

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