Developing a Policy for Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Primary Schools

As the integration of pupils with special educational needs is now commonplace in Irish primary schools, many school staffs are rethinking and reformulating whole school policy on special educational needs in light of experience. What factors influence their deliberations? What in-school issues must be addressed to ensure that policy is relevant to the everyday life of the school?

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INTRODUCTION

> ... developing a whole-school policy (for the education of pupils with special needs) is a useful and important process. It is a method for clarifying beliefs, accepting responsibilities at school level and making the best use of available expertise and resources.
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> (Bines, 1989, in Westwood, 1997, p. 212)

The process of integrating pupils with special educational needs into mainstream schools is now part of Irish education. We have a generation of children who have come through our schools in close daily contact with classmates who have disabilities requiring extra educational intervention. Earlier worries and fears for both mainstream and special schools, which underlay the controversy surrounding the integration debate, have abated somewhat, and there is far more recognition that many other pupils also have special, if not so obvious, educational needs.

Although structures of support are still lacking, there have been positive changes in the provision for children with disabilities and recognition on the part of teachers and especially school principals that change must be approached proactively. Policy-making and whole school planning are seen as the means of bringing clear structure to this positive action. Daunting as the task of planning for

pupils with special educational needs may be, the lack of such planning presents the school with a far more discouraging and time-consuming task of dealing with problems and difficulties without guidelines or procedures. In the unplanned situation development can be haphazard and problem solving reactive. Success or failure may hinge on individual personalities and temperaments, both of which can be creative and positive forces, but which need an objective framework in which to operate.

DEFINING POLICY

The development of school policy for special educational needs can no longer be seen as a luxury. It cannot be simplified to a morally correct statement embodying notions of human rights and equality. Nor can it merely entail a list of provisions and resources offered by the school. It may incorporate both of these elements but in doing so, it must be real, relevant, operable and agreed. It must lead to everyday action. Maxcy (1991) defines policy as that which regulates decision behaviour. A school's policy on special educational needs must be based on a clear and firm statement of belief which will inform the behaviours, decisions and actions of the staff in their everyday work as teachers. For this to become a reality the policy must go on to translate this fundamental belief into provision and action. In the British system, The Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) requires schools to supply a written document which contains information on three aspects of provision for special educational needs:

SCHOOL PROVISION FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- **Basic information about the school's special education provision**
- **Information on the school's policies for identification, assessment and provision for all pupils with special educational needs**
- **Information about the school's staffing policies and partnerships beyond the school.**

Suggestions are given about the detail which should be contained within this broad framework, including, for example, items such as names of co-ordinators, records kept, admission arrangements, etc.

This suggested structure can be informative to the policy maker in the Irish school context. However there cannot be a form of "blanket policy" which will fit any school. Maxcy (1991) comments that policies "tend to be responsive to contextuality" and therefore "what may be a 'good policy' in one school or school

district may be 'useless' in another" (p. 81). Even when policy is formulated and written down, it will require frequent review as the school itself is in a constant state of change.

IDENTIFYING THE POPULATION

In developing policy, it is necessary to identify the population it is meant to serve. Because the policy needs to be responsive to changes in the school, it cannot be specifically aimed at any one individual pupil. Rather it needs to be a "catch all," a strong scaffolding of practical proposals which can serve to support current pupils, as well as future pupils. The term 'special educational needs' requires clarification. It is unhelpful to list these needs in terms of disabilities. Rather the recognition of four groups of children in need of special educational attention is suggested:

PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

- **pupils who at the time of enrollment have already been identified as having a disability which requires extra educational support;**
- **pupils, whose special educational needs are identified while in the school;**
- **pupils who for various reasons, for example through illness, bereavement or family problems, may require temporary special educational support;**
- **pupils, whom Sinclair and Ghory (1987) refer to as "marginal students."**

This last group consists of children who, due to learning and/or behaviour problems do not seem to fit into the school community and, although not immediately thought of within the special education framework, might well benefit from a good policy.

NEED FOR POSITIVE PLANNING

For many Irish primary schools, the challenge of integration was an immensely difficult process as structures and supports were not in place when this change began in Irish education. Policy for these pupils has perhaps happened through trial and error, with individual schools learning by mistakes and triumphs. Systems have developed and become what Maxcy (1991) refers to as "institutionalized habit" which have led to "traditions that are themselves kinds of

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operating rules" (p. 86). The dual dilemma facing many teachers in providing education for students with disabilities and 'marginal' students, places school staffs in a situation where tried and tested methods no longer appear appropriate to a growing number of the students. In such situations, a bewilderment and fatigue can set in, unless the problem is addressed and planned for at the early stages of recognition. The difficult task facing the school principal or policy committee is to inspire the teachers to meet the new challenge positively rather than with a sense of jaded submission.

CLARIFYING BELIEFS

The practical planning element of a school policy regarding special educational needs requires a very strong underlying belief in the worthiness of the enterprise of striving to educate these pupils in the best possible way. Although all staff in the school will be affected by the policy arrived at, it is at the level of the teacher that the policy will succeed or fail, and it is amongst the teachers that discussion must take place and decisions must be made. The person entrusted with leading the policy development process must set about encouraging discussion, allowing the teachers a forum to express their suggestions, their hopes and their worries, and must be capable of promoting positive attitudes.

Past difficulties must be balanced by remembering successes, or by discussion of how to plan for a similar situation in the future. Means must be sought to inspire teachers to see themselves as experts, with skill and experience which no other professionals have, and who must and can develop strategies for these pupils. The school cannot wait until other professionals or extra resources arrive. It cannot spare valuable time waiting for an imagined solution. Neither can it afford to regard the pupil with special needs as someone who really belongs somewhere else, but rather as a pupil in our school who deserves the very best educational chances.

One of the responsibilities of the leader of policy creation is to be very well informed on current good practice at home and abroad and more importantly, to present this information in a positive and inspirational way to the school staff. He/she must seize opportunities to present such ideas as possible problem solvers or good supportive structures which the staff can use and improve on for their own situation. Well-informed people make well-informed decisions, so in this context the policy leader must be able to provide clear and useful information in an easily accessed form.

THE SCHOOL'S STORY

As the policy process moves through the discussion stage to the formalizing of a written policy, there needs to be an awareness of what might be called 'the school's story.' Hargreaves (1992) would see this as a vital element in the "culture" of a school. All debate of the issues will consciously and unconsciously be affected by the individual and group experiences of the staff. This is why internal planning is essential. In some schools, for example, the early experiences of integration created enormous stress. In such situations, this experience will undoubtedly influence discussion. During that difficult period however, some teachers discovered an interest and talent for working with these pupils, and the staffs of these schools became better informed about disabilities. Many principals, through necessity, became proactive in fighting for improved resources, rescheduling ancillary staff timetables to provide more support for individual pupils and creating new links with providers of special education in their locality. One could now look to such schools as already possessing many very good elements of special education provision.

Policy discussion needs to affirm the teachers, help them to realise that their imagination and skill were the sources of success when concrete resources were not available. Mary Warnock (1985), a pioneer in the area of special education, argues that no amount of material resources "will ever be a substitute for the human interchange between the teacher and his individual student" (p. 263). Warnock (1983) also claims, "Schools that do well for their slow learners are actually likely to do well for their high fliers. A good school is one that recognises the difference between one child and another, and manages to cater for all, not perhaps perfectly, but with good will and imagination" (p. 264). The policy and planning challenge facing school staffs is now two-fold. Firstly, there is the question of how to harness the imagination, and to rekindle or sustain the good will. Secondly, these schools need to stand back and reexamine ways of putting clearer structures onto special needs policies that developed haphazardly in response to problems.

NEGOTIATING RESOURCES

Although the use of the term "negotiation" is not immediately associated with education, it describes well what must take place in preparing a realistic plan for educating pupils with special needs. Most teachers are quite confident in their teaching ability. For schools which were involved in integration from its early days, experiences with pupils with learning disabilities have proven to teachers

that the main need for any of these children is good teaching. Policy discussions in the same schools ten years ago might have centered on calls for a solution from outside. Today's debate however is more likely to focus on the teachers' need to give more time to these pupils, reflecting a confidence that they can support these children well, given the right conditions.

If the groundwork of establishing basic beliefs and informing the debate on best practice has been successful, there is more likely to be a commitment from teachers to channel resources to support these pupils as well as their colleagues who are faced with the biggest challenges. Every teacher's opinion is valuable in establishing the needs of the pupils, the teachers and the school in general. It is often the case that the needs given priority by the staff will be concerned with issues around dealing with children who have behaviour problems in addition to their learning difficulties. This is a valid priority where the behaviour is such that it interferes with the learning of all pupils in the classroom. Clear structures to deal with the problem, while unlikely to eliminate it completely, should clear the way to create more learning-friendly environments.

Decisions in planning for behavioural difficulties must involve negotiation not only of human resources (e.g. for a class assistant to spend less time in a classroom in order to provide extra playground supervision for pupils with challenging behaviour) and time resources (e.g. the class teacher taking time to implement a behaviour programme for a particular pupil), but also negotiation with other elements of whole school planning, in this case school policy on discipline (e.g. How can we apply a rule about standing quietly in line to a pupil with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder?). This is probably the most delicate area for negotiation as it is inextricably linked to past experiences and strongly held personal opinions of individual staff members.

However if the groundwork has been prepared and the positive outcomes obvious then negotiation should lead to valuable and agreed structures which can be tried and renegotiated if necessary. At all times the teachers need to see that if they are dissatisfied with how things stand at present, then there must be some changes attempted to move the situation forward. Repetition of problems or waiting for an outside solution are simply not options.

CURRICULUM

It is quite remarkable that policy making for special educational needs in schools tends to revolve around administrative and organisational issues when the delivery

of curriculum is at the very heart of schooling. For the pupils with special educational needs there can be a sort of impoverished approach, which might be called the "provide a ramp" syndrome. A school may be physically adapted to meet the needs of a pupil who uses a wheelchair. A computer is provided for a child with a particular disability. An extra classroom assistant is supplied to assist with toileting, etc. But the central question of how does this school deliver the curriculum to the child with special educational needs is sometimes never addressed at all. This is an extremely difficult task in terms of presenting such information in written form.

The class teacher in his/her daily interaction with the pupil intuitively does much of the work of adaptation of the curriculum to an individual child's needs. But where there are many individuals, such as the class teacher, the resource teacher and the learning support teacher all working with the child, the school policy should at least outline the way in which these teachers will work together and contain specific ways in which the curriculum will be planned and adapted. This area might for example list items such as: adaptation of school texts; time-tabling for out-of-class and in-class support; safeguards within time-tabling to ensure the pupil is not missing vital areas of curriculum while withdrawn from class; decision procedures for prioritising areas of the curriculum for extra attention; provision of time for planning meetings; preparation of individual educational plans; arrangements for homework, etc. At the level of policy writing, none of these elements needs to be detailed, but without their inclusion the area of curriculum delivery is in danger of being lost in administrative detail.

DEVELOPING WITHIN-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Emphasis has so far been placed on the role of teaching staff in policy planning. However, policy statements about the education of the "whole child" will be meaningless without an awareness and involvement of others involved in the child's educational development. Generally the partners involved in the education of the pupils with special educational needs fall into four categories:

PARTNERS IN EDUCATION

- **Partners within the school**
- **Family members**
- **The community outside the school**
- **Specialist support services**

Whereas schools are generally aware of the necessity for developing partnership links with individuals or groups outside the school, the potential of policy planning for partnerships within the school itself may be overlooked.

All members of the school staff need to be made aware of policies in regard to children with special needs. Classroom assistants are vitally important people to the child with special needs. These staff members are at the frontline in supporting educational programmes and also in supervision of the pupils. It is often the case in urban and suburban areas that many of these staff members live in the same local community as the children and therefore can bring a fresh perspective to the school's knowledge of the child. Sometimes also, pupils form good relationships with these members of staff, who do not make the same learning demands of them as the teachers. Such positive influences need to be harnessed through making policy provision for information exchange about the educational and behaviour programmes they will be supporting.

The pupils in the school, as well as being "consumers," are also part of the partnership which forms the school community. As such they have both rights and contributions. For the young child with special needs, interaction with his/her peers will form a central part of his/her education and social development. Where such interaction is inappropriate, problems may arise for the child with special educational needs and also for his/her peers. Similar difficulties can also occur where the pupil's special needs are so great that an inordinate amount of the teacher's time must be spent catering for them.

The *Report of the Special Education Review Committee* (1993) spoke of integration "to the maximum extent which is consistent with the broader overall interests of both the pupil with disability and the other pupils in the class/group" (p.19). Special needs policy must formulate criteria against which any difficult situations can be examined. Such structures will help to avoid hasty decisions being made in pressurised circumstances. As contributors, other pupils can be surprisingly willing to make compromises for children with special needs. They are capable of understanding why some pupils need extra help or need the rules slightly changed, and a sensitive teacher can effectively use classmates as powerful allies in assisting the child with special needs.

CONCLUSION

Policy for the education of pupils with special educational needs must represent what is possible given the resources and supports available. However, resources

must not be seen as material supports only. The experience, expertise, creativity and imagination of the teachers in a school are its best resource. Its best supports come from its partners in the education process both inside and outside the school.

Policy-making must harness all of these positive forces to the benefit of all the school's pupils and use them to reflect an underlying belief in the value of education for all children. How far the school is able to go in its efforts to provide high quality education for these pupils will depend on its past experiences, its willingness to negotiate resources, and its ability to create a scaffolding of procedures which will be strong enough to provide for unforeseen problems, and flexible enough to provide for the needs of individual children and their families.

Policy creation does not end with its documentation. It must find life in its day-to-day implementation. Its effectiveness will be evidenced not only in the atmosphere of tolerance, respect and encouragement it should engender, but also in the improved learning of all pupils.

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