

## **Partnership in Progress: Special and Ordinary Schools working together: Creating an inclusive School Community through Collaboration, and Links**

Marino School, Bray - a School for pupils with physical disabilities and associated learning difficulties has since 1993, developed an extensive Links and Integration Programme in conjunction with local primary and post primary schools in its catchment area .

The purposes of the links programme include the creation of opportunities for contact and friendship for children and young people with and without disabilities. Shared curricular activities are the vehicle for this process. A further purpose is to promote collaboration between the school involved.

### **Rationale**

The educational integration of children with disabilities in ordinary - mainstream schools is now established policy in Ireland and throughout the European Union (Ireland 1995, 1998, European Commission, 1996).

Progressive policy on integration in Ireland has not yet been matched with sufficient resources to enable schools to adequately cater for many children with special needs arising from physical disabilities and associated learning difficulties. The absence of adequate experience and support in ordinary schools can inhibit the possibilities of integration. The **continuum of special education provision** (advocated in SERC 1993) which exists on paper has yet to become a reality in practice throughout the school system.

One of the challenges for our education system is merge mainstream and special provision to enable links programmes can facilitate the sharing of experience and resources between special and ordinary schools and in this way be a further resource towards supporting successful integration of children with special needs in mainstream schools whether on a part-time or a full-time basis.

Working towards greater levels of integration of children with disabilities in ordinary schools, the Special Education Review Committee stated:

*In future it is anticipated that many more pupils will be able to receive part of their education in special schools and part in ordinary schools (page 23)*

Links programmes and shared placements between special and ordinary schools can have an important role in creating opportunities for integration. The individual and collaborative work of teachers, therapists and others are all elements of the links programmes between Marino School and other local schools. Successful links involves the promotion of collaborative approaches, embracing mutual support, sharing of information and joint problem solving to enable children with different abilities to participate in shared activities. This development of an "interactive professionalism" facilitates the establishment of arrangements, practices, curriculum development and adaptation of the environment, which can enable the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in ordinary schools to occur.

### **Promoting integration from the Context of the Special School**

The concept of integration is open to wide interpretation. In the Irish context, the SERC Report (1993) defined educational integration as:

*the participation of pupils with disabilities in School activities with other pupils, to the maximum extent which is consistent with the broader overall interests of both the pupils with disabilities and other pupils in the class/group (page 19)*

The policy of the integration of children with special needs in ordinary schools has been driven by a range of forces including the views of parents, educational and social research, the advocacy of disabled people, developments in social policy, legalisation and the experience of other countries. Notwithstanding the extent of the momentum for change in relation to integration, significant obstacles remain. As (Fullan, 1993) emphasises achieving positive and sustainable educational change is a complex process. Ordinary and special schools may both need to change and to develop new approaches meeting the educational needs of students with special needs if the policy of integration and the development of the continuum of provision is to become fully operational.

One of the features of the Irish Education system is that it comprises two parallel sub systems of ordinary and special schools. Less than 1% of all pupils attend the 121 special schools. Teachers and other professionals with the knowledge, skills and experience to facilitate a process of educational change towards integration are working in special and ordinary schools but rarely have the opportunities to communicate, work together in collaboration and learn from each other. (SERC 1993) states:

*Linkages must be established between the two parallel systems involving the sharing of teachers and facilities, the interchange of pupils and involvement in shared projects (page 22)*

The development of a links programme can help "create a bridge of conversation" (Starrat 1993) between teachers and others working in ordinary and special schools, links can also provide opportunities for a practical realisation of the issues involved in successful integration. This process may facilitate a shared understanding among students, teachers, therapists and the whole school community regarding the development of inclusive practices in and between schools. Links can in this way become a step towards fuller integration and enable the continuum of provision as advocated in Department policy to become a more accessible reality for children with disabilities.

Links programmes and shared placements can therefore offer a wider range of choices to children with disabilities and their parents. As the submission of the Forum for People with Disabilities at the National Convention on Education in 1994 pointed out:

*integrated and segregated education are not mutually exclusive: special education should be seen as part of a continuum; greater mobility between special and ordinary schools must be fostered. Report on the National Education Convention, 1994, Page 122.*

In the European context (Stukat 1993) has noted:

*while still adhering to the basic idea of offering disabled pupils a school environment that is as little restrictive as possible, many people nowadays stress that an all or none solution is not the only choice and that a polarised discussion may be counter-productive.*

For historical reasons, ordinary and special schools may have little or no contact unless special arrangements are made. The desirability of establishing contacts between ordinary and special schools has been emphasised in many important reports.

Links Programmes, involving a process of inter school co-operation and learning as a team through the collaboration of teachers, therapists childcare staff and others in regular ongoing and structured activities can have the potential to bring about conditions which help create a more inclusive educational community at the individual school and wider school community levels.

### **Current Situation**

There is a demand for both integration and specialised provision. The SERC Report (1993) favoured a policy of:

*as much integration as appropriate and feasible with as little segregation as is necessary* (page 22)

Accordingly, it recommended a policy of integration and also stated that it would be necessary to establish a continuum of services to match the continuum of special needs. In these circumstances an important element of the educational change required to respond to the growing understanding of the needs of children with disabilities would be to develop a flexible and more inclusive system that will "remove the duality of the special and mainstream system" (Strategy for Equality 1996).

Programmes of links and shared placements offer pupils with special educational needs and their parents wider range of educational choices. It is also the experience of staff at Marino that they have significant potential in bringing about an inclusive school community for children with physical disabilities and associated learning difficulties.

### **COLLABORATION AND LINKS: THE PRACTICE**

Over a number of years Marino School had developed informal links with mainstream school in the Bray area with students working together on school projects and programmes of work. In September 1997 it was agreed that one of the duties of the resource teacher would be to assist in the development of more formal linkages between schools. Much of her school week is spent supporting and working with pupils from Marino School in mainstream settings and liaising with principals, teachers and childcare staff involved. Collaboration between class teachers at Marino and teachers in mainstream has been very positive and has been reinforced through regular communication and reviews of the arrangements.

At present there are two main types of programme in place They are:

- 1. Links:** Links programmes allow pupils from mainstream schools and Marino School to work on shared activities and projects together on a regular basis. Classes usually meet once a week alternating between schools. They also allow individual pupils to spend part of their school day in the mainstream setting and to attend for individual subjects. This arrangement has been particularly useful for post primary students who attend the local community college and who have been studying one or two subjects for the Junior Certificate examination.
- 2. Shared Placement Arrangements:** Shared placements allow pupils from Marino School to spend at least one full day or more in a mainstream school depending on the needs and abilities of the individual pupil. Where possible the shared placement will be with the pupils local school. Approximately 1/5 of pupils travel to Marino School from outside the Bray area. Spending part of their school week in their local school allows these pupils to make friends in their local communities while continuing to benefit from individualised education and therapy programmes at Marino. Such shared placements also provide important experience for those pupils who may eventually benefit from fuller integration in the mainstream setting.

Marino School is currently working with 13 schools in the Bray and greater Wicklow areas, 11 primary and 2 Post-Primary. There are 32 teachers in total from these schools working together to ensure that the arrangements are a success for all the pupils involved. The following table outlines the extent of the programme in place this year.

The Links and Shared Placement Programmes between Marino School and other primary and post primary schools in the area has been an evolving project reflecting an example of partnership in progress in education. The following issues have arisen;

### **ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES**

#### **1. Transport**

Financial support from the Department of Education and Science towards the cost of transport would be essential to maintain assessment arrangements for future development.

#### **2. Dual Enrolment**

The best educational arrangements for a child may involve spending a number of days in each school every week. Dual enrolment has been recommended in the SERC Report and in the Strategy for Equality (1996).

#### **3. Childcare**

When pupils are participating in shared placement and other curriculum activities childcare personnel are required to assist. Further childcare support from the Department of Education will be required in the longer term.

#### **4. Resource Teacher**

The development of links and integration relationships with schools requires a great deal of time. The appointment of a resource teacher for this programme would enable this project to be sustained and developed over time.

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