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Leadership and Staff Development in Special Education

Special and mainstream schools will need effective leadership to meet the challenge of inclusive education. Professional development, along with the other processes of school improvement, will play an important part in ensuring that staff are able to adapt to new ways of working.

BRIAN ROBBINS is a visiting lecturer at Birmingham University.

THE CHALLENGE OF INCLUSION

Established patterns of special education are under scrutiny. During the next few years we can expect to see considerable changes in all types of school.

In a report on the ways in which fourteen European countries deal with the issues and practicalities of integrating pupils with special educational needs, Meijer (1998) identifies several key factors. The study found that most progress has been made in those countries where the whole education system, including special education, is under one ministry. Another factor was the prevalence of special schools. Where there is a large and well-established special school sector it feels threatened by moves towards inclusion but there was evidence from some countries of those schools playing an active role in the development of inclusive practices.

Undoubtedly the growth of inclusive education brings changing expectations for all types of existing provision. The local authority where I live transformed overnight from a special education backwater to a model of good practice not because of anything it had done, but because of what it had not done. Unlike many other local authorities it had not built day special schools for pupils with moderate learning difficulties during the sixties. The only provision was units for slow learners in mainstream schools. After the publication of the Warnock Report (DES, 1978), which encouraged moves towards educating pupils with special needs in mainstream education, these units became examples of what the report termed 'locational integration.'

Most countries have new education laws and the job of a teacher has been changed not only by the legislation itself but also by the impact of that legislation on public expectations. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), signed in 1994 by representatives of ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations, has signalled a world-wide trend towards inclusive education and has ensured that inclusion remains very firmly on the agenda for everyone involved in special education.

We are being encouraged to move away from terminology such as 'integration,' which involves making special arrangements to enable pupils with 'special needs' to gain access to the education on offer, to the conceptualisation of whole school provision (Ainscow, 1997) that encompasses the whole range of needs presented by individual pupils. This presents a challenge to existing provision and both special education services and special schools have to reconsider their roles. Mainstream schools are faced with the prospect of keeping pupils whom they might previously have referred for alternative placement.

CONFLICTING EXPECTATIONS

All this is happening whilst teachers and schools have to adjust to new expectations both locally and nationally. These expectations can appear at times to be contradictory. For example, the drive to raise standards in schools does not always sit easily with the desire to direct additional resources to those who are unlikely to be the school's most academically successful pupils. Whilst the achievement of vocational certificates may be an immense one for students with learning difficulties and will have demanded considerable time, energy and commitment from their teachers it does not measure up, in the public eye, to the number of university places gained by the sixth-form students.

In a large primary class, teachers can find themselves spending what might be considered a disproportionate amount of time on a few pupils. Currently teachers in the UK implementing the Literacy Strategy, which promotes a whole-class teaching approach, are concerned that this will disadvantage those pupils who need individual attention. In addition they know from experience that certain pupils present such a combination of learning difficulties and challenging behaviour that their presence will disrupt the class.

In September 1999 those same teachers will begin implementing the Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999) which is based on similar principles. Primary school mathematics co-ordinators have been involved in the development phase together

with special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and in two areas special school teachers have received training on the strategy. The outcomes of this involvement will be part of a study of primary mathematics teaching that will draw upon approaches being followed in several countries (Robbins, 1999).

CONCERNS IN SPECIAL SCHOOLS

Teachers in special schools see the moves towards inclusion as indicating a lack of appreciation of the quality of work done in their schools. They are faced with the prospect of having to adopt roles for which many of them do not feel prepared and for which they can see no good justification. This has led in some cases to a siege mentality, with special schools taking the view that if they can survive for long enough inclusion will be found to be either unrealistic, expensive or impracticable (there will be evidence to support all three assertions) and the tide will turn back in their direction.

A Dutch teacher complained in a letter that her country's aim of reducing the number of pupils in special schools is a device to save money and will result in larger classes so that children with special needs will get a worse deal. At a conference in Germany teachers from several countries expressed their concern that pupils with special needs will experience verbal and physical bullying if they are returned to mainstream schools. They believed that teachers in mainstream schools are not always sympathetic to pupils who need additional support and do not see it as part of their job. One special school headteacher said recently that to expect special schools to work with mainstream schools was 'like asking turkeys to co-operate in preparations for Christmas.'

NEW CHALLENGES

These attitudes present a significant challenge to those responsible for the development of special schools, not least because they contain a grain or more of truth. School leaders must be ready to challenge in a constructive manner plans that emanate from politicians and administrators. They have to remain in touch with developments beyond the school but must at the same time be sensitive to the morale of their own school, or as the old rhyme says 'keep one eye on the pot and the other up the chimney.' They may have to face criticism, even hostility, from colleagues and parents when they promote activities that could be seen as leading to inclusion. They have to remind colleagues, even if some find it unpalatable, that schools exist to provide opportunities for pupils rather than job security for teachers. They should encourage colleagues to recognise that whilst there will

always be a need for specialist expertise it may mean working in different ways and possibly in different places.

Even if they take the school community along with them, as some special and mainstream school headteachers have done (Thomas, Walker & Webb, 1998), there are still a number of ongoing resource and logistical problems that have to be overcome. The nature of this task and the qualities needed to carry it out successfully are worthy of further consideration.

Ainscow (1997) considers that many of the teaching strategies developed in special schools may not transfer easily to mainstream schools and that it may be more helpful to look at their existing strengths. He describes lessons he has observed in mainstream schools where teachers have included all the pupils, many with significant learning difficulties, in whole-class work. Among the qualities he has identified in schools that do include pupils successfully are teamwork and planning.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Both teamwork and planning figure prominently in the school improvement project described by Brighouse and Woods (1999) which was based on supported self-evaluation. Their approach was built on seven processes, of which Leadership and Staff Development were two. The others were Teaching and Learning, Management and Organisation, Collective Review, Creating the Environment and Parental Involvement. All types of school in the Birmingham local education authority were involved and whilst there are differences in the way these processes may be followed, the principle of improvement generated within the school was found to be applicable in all types of school. Administrators, politicians and interest groups may promote change but they will not achieve it. As Fullan (1993) points out, school reform imposed from above will fail if it is not carried out in partnership with schools.

Teachers need time to make change happen and this begins with an acceptance of the need to work in a different way. There are many different responses to the prospect of change ranging from enthusiasm to obstructionism. School leaders must recognise the variety of attitudes towards change amongst their colleagues and try to make it a positive process. This is a tall order, particularly when teachers feel overwhelmed by initiatives, inspection, education laws and being held accountable for all society's ills!

STAFF SUPPORT

The task for school leaders is to support staff who may lack confidence in dealing with pupils whose needs are outside what they have always considered to be the parameters of their teaching skills. They may previously have referred the pupil to an outside specialist with the expectation that the pupil would one day be placed in a special school. They may have genuinely believed that this was in the best interests of the pupil and that his or her removal would benefit the rest of the class. To expect that teacher now to adopt an approach that means retaining that child and doing what had previously been considered the domain of specialist teachers is to challenge well-entrenched views on what should be expected of a class teacher. A change in this perception will not be achieved overnight.

The special needs co-ordinator in a Dutch primary school told me how it had taken seven years to move from a situation where teachers sent him pupils because they could not cope to asking him what they needed to do to be able to keep the child in their class. During that time he had been running in-service training sessions on Time and Classroom Management, assessing children and, when appropriate, allocating some time from the school's support teacher.

NEED FOR CONSIDERED RESPONSE TO CHANGE

Special schools face different challenges but they too can be approached through a school improvement approach. Leaders need to take into account that some people fear change whilst others relish it. It is how they respond to change that will shape their future, the future of their schools and the way they teach their pupils. They must beware of bandwagons and make informed judgements on what is the most promising way forward. The debate on inclusion is changing. There is a growing awareness, reflected in the work of Tilstone and her fellow contributors (1998), that it is not an event that will happen when the last special school is closed but a constant process of development that impinges on all aspects of school life. This view is not shared by those who see the closure of special schools as an essential pre-requisite for inclusion, but as the purpose of this paper is to map a way forward for existing institutions it would not be helpful to speculate whether they, in the long term, will win the day.

The current reality is that special schools exist in the gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the reality of mainstream schools. The task of leadership in special education is about seeing that gap as a window of opportunity, even if in the long term the result of their endeavours will be the closure of that gap.

Special schools need to establish an analytical style so that they can make objective judgements on proposals for change. They need to undertake a process of self-review, ideally with the support of a carefully chosen and well-briefed critical friend, to establish their own strengths and make some projections on their potential role.

THE ROLE OF SPECIAL SCHOOLS

The European Union's Council of Ministers saw the role of special schools as complementary to that of mainstream schools. Hegarty (1994) defined some of the tasks that they could undertake which included assessment, particularly in cases that mainstream schools find difficult, providing advice, consultancy and support, evaluating resources, conducting research, contributing to professional development and being a resource for parents.

A particular special school, in setting out to establish itself as a 'SENCO's One-stop Shop,' identified what it was already offering to local schools. For six years it had belonged to a secondary school and a primary school partnership and on one of their training days members of staff visited local schools to identify some of the ways in which the working relationship could be developed. Their feedback included the following recommendations:

SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP: RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Continue to contribute to the professional development of mainstream colleagues by supporting them in developing Individual Education Plans, sharing good practice, hosting meetings for Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinators (SENCOs) and providing courses for Learning Support Assistants.**
- **Provide more inclusive activities for its pupils in collaboration with mainstream schools, and continuing the weekly visit by older pupils to a nursery class in a neighbouring primary school.**
- **Continue being in the inspectors' words 'a good school' and provide an appropriate curriculum for those pupils who attended full-time.**
- **Consult with colleagues in local schools to see if there was a demand for the other kinds of collaboration described by Hegarty.**

A successful bid was made for LEA funds to support these activities and staff from the special school have been seconded to work with SENCOs in twelve neighbouring primary schools. The school also has a close relationship with a special school in the Netherlands and several members of staff have taken part in exchange visits.

The Dutch WSNS scheme (Meijer, 1994) was introduced as a means of reducing the number of children attending special schools, which in some areas was over four per cent of the school population. It set up local clusters centred on a special school, which had the role of supporting the mainstream schools and providing in-service training for their teachers.

A similar philosophy is evident in the UK where the government's programme for action in special education (DfEE, 1998) confirms that special schools will continue to play a vital role and that the government will promote further inclusion by "identifying and disseminating good practice by special schools in developing practical links with mainstream schools, and promoting special schools' contribution to an increasingly inclusive education system."

A CULTURE OF TEAM-WORK

Several professional development activities have already been mentioned but a more systematic approach is needed if teachers are to be equipped with the skills to achieve inclusion.

Leaders of mainstream schools will have to develop a team-based culture that recognises the contribution of both teachers and support staff. SENCOs are finding that keeping contact with other agencies is time-consuming and they will need time to be able to carry out their role effectively. Catering for individual needs will have to be an integral part of school development planning, not a bolt-on afterthought. They will have to make contact with local special schools to see what can be gained from a closer working relationship.

Schools are not alone in facing this change of perception; national governments have too often implemented reforms without giving due consideration to the impact of those reforms on those who fall outside their pre-conceived norms. Mainstream teachers and local inspectors will have to make an effort to include special schools in projects and special school staff will have to keep up to date with initiatives and demand that they be included.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Leaders of special schools will have to provide opportunities for staff to refresh themselves on what is currently happening in mainstream education as many of them have no recent experience in that sector. They will have to look at the school curriculum to ensure that pupils are being offered as wide a range of experiences as they would have in mainstream. They will have to look at their teaching methods and consider whether they can learn from mainstream colleagues. Special school teachers who have worked with subject advisory teachers have found that by both bringing their specialist knowledge and experience to bear there is mutual benefit and the quality of the teaching that results from their collaboration is enhanced (Robbins, 1995).

Wiltshire (1998) looks in detail at the implications for special schools of taking on a wider role and concludes that they will have to work in partnership with other schools and agencies. There are resource implications for schools and funding formulae will need to take account of the need for staff to be released from classroom teaching for all or part of the week so that they can undertake the other tasks that arise. Staff allocated to these tasks will need professional development to prepare them for their new duties. Schools that give a high priority to staff development are likely to be better placed to meet the demands they will face in the future.

One special school operated a review and evaluation schedule that involved both staff and pupils in the process of school development planning. Having participated in setting targets for the following three years staff were then in a position to identify their own personal development needs. This in turn was fed into the planning of the staff development programme. A system of mentoring was introduced for new members of staff and for existing staff taking on new roles. An accredited course was set up for learning support assistants and one was trained through the government's Modern Apprenticeship scheme. The school has also worked on joint curriculum workshops with colleagues in local primary and secondary schools and is now participating in one of the government's education action zones. It is hardly surprising that the job of headteacher was often described as 'keeping all the balls in the air!'

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

Various studies of leadership have highlighted certain key qualities and there is general agreement on what makes a successful school leader. Among the ones identified in a study of effective school management (DFE, 1993) were:

QUALITIES OF A SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL LEADER

- **Having a definite sense of direction**
- **Having a clear vision for the school**
- **Having a consultative style**
- **Having a positive and constructive attitude**
- **Being supportive**
- **Being well-organised**
- **Preparing staff for impending developments**

All these are important qualities for those in leadership positions in the twenty-first century but the role envisaged in this paper extends the role of headteacher beyond the traditional one. They will need opportunities to develop their own skills in team-building, action research, negotiation, establishing collaborative ventures, bidding for funds and evaluating projects. In such circumstances leadership cannot remain the province of one person and members of staff will need to develop the ability to manage in-service training, consultancy, assessment and action research as well as their own classrooms.

INTERNATIONAL LINKS

Much can be gained by sharing experiences with colleagues in other countries. Four special schools, from the UK, Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, worked together on a joint curriculum project supported by the European Union's Socrates programme. As well as enriching their pupils' curriculum they found significant benefits in terms of their own professional development. The partnership that grew from this original project has now developed into an international in-service training project on supporting teachers in mainstream schools.

Teachers who have taken up placements in industry have found this a valuable experience and having personally spent time with a cross-channel ferry company, I found many interesting parallels with the running of an outward-looking special school. Apart from the obvious benefit of making useful contacts for the school's annual visit to Brittany the kind of management issues that arose from being an organisation that had regular contact with its customers, which at times was difficult, was something to which any special school headteacher could relate.

CONCLUSION

Those who are in leadership positions in both mainstream and special schools have an important role in challenging traditional assumptions and leading the development of inclusive approaches. Mainstream schools will need to accept that removal to a special school is an option for a diminishing number of pupils and special schools will need to adapt to a role of supporting mainstream schools in providing inclusive education. The task for those leading special education will be to ensure that specific, targeted support is available from people with the experience, qualifications and personal qualities to be effective in meeting particular types and combinations of educational needs. In order to develop the capability of their staff to work in what for many will be unfamiliar territory they will need to give a high priority to staff development.

To do this well requires a re-appraisal of the solutions that they have developed in their traditional role of providing an alternative to the mainstream educational setting. Above all they must be speaking a language that is common to all involved in educating children and not build castles of expertise that appear remote and daunting to classroom teachers in mainstream schools.

As I learned from the ferry company your customers are your priority and special schools are finding that their customer base now includes colleagues in other schools.

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