

The Role of the Resource Teacher: Case Studies in Collaborative Good Practice

Resource teachers have the opportunity to develop their role in ways that are supportive, encouraging and empowering to their colleagues who are attempting to meet the special needs of pupils in ordinary classes. Forging collaborative teamwork and helping to focus on agreed specified individualised goals are some of the strategies aimed at sustaining successful integration.

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Since 1992, the Department of Education has appointed 36 resource teachers throughout the country to provide teaching support for pupils with mental handicap and other disabilities in mainstream national schools. The emphasis in their work is on direct teaching of individuals or of small groups in designated schools for regular and sustained periods, with some advisory and support work. Resource teachers may serve a single school or a larger group of more dispersed schools, and their case-load consists of 30 pupil equivalents. A great deal of the special help required will inevitably be provided by the class teacher in the normal classroom situation.

DETAILING A COMPREHENSIVE ROLE

In addition to being directly involved with children in need of special help the resource teacher's role should include the following duties:

- co-ordinating special help programmes for individual children;
- giving guidance to colleagues on diagnosis and on special help problems and programmes;

- linking with others, both in and out of school, who are involved with individual children;
- planning intervention programmes;
- monitoring individual programmes and progress;
- meeting with parents to discuss their role in helping their child;
- advising on the most suitable form of record keeping;
- understanding the issues associated with the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills;
- understanding, as far as possible, how and why children fail.

PROGRAMMES FOR POSITIVE INTERVENTION

Since the programme of special help should be designed with individual children in mind, it is possible to consider such programmes only in broad terms. Special help programmes will have their origins in diagnosis and should be individualised, taking into account pupils needs, always fitting the programme to the pupil and not the pupils to an existing pre-planned programme. Programmes should be designed to show positive results from the beginning. They should be designed to promote positive attitudes to self and to develop attributes such as self-confidence, self-discipline, resourcefulness, persistence, enthusiasm and independence. Finally, they should be broadly based and moving beyond the acquisition of basic skills.

CO-ORDINATING INTER-PROFESSIONAL ROLES

The teacher's role in identifying, anticipating and remediating learning difficulties and in fostering the child's emotional and social development is a challenging one at every level. Crucially, this role is boundary spanning, requiring that medical, psychological and social information be pulled together in some coherent way so that all the needs of the child can be catered for in the classroom.

Throughout the history of special education there has been a strong tradition of respective professional allegiance, while modern day sophistication in distinguishing developmental issues has further increased the number of specialists involved with children and schools. However, the separating out of the aspects of a child's development often results in various parts of a child's problem being diagnosed, treated and remediated in isolation one from the other, so that it is perhaps not surprising if there are sometimes various and conflicting perceptions of the child's situation.

A LINK BETWEEN TEACHERS AND THERAPISTS

Similarly, although therapies may mirror educational aims and in some ways parallel classroom pursuits, liaison between teacher and therapist is not automatic. Usually children are treated outside the school, so that we separately address issues which are not in fact separate. Thomson (1984, p. 122) observes that, "the system and its success depend not just on how well individual parts function but on how these parts fit and work together." It is therefore important to find ways to fulfil our various professional obligations in co-operation with others. We must become more aware of how our skills might combine and be used to better effect. Teachers must make stronger application to diagnostic and advisory services so that those presently on the periphery of education identify and become more fully involved in the context in which they have chosen to apply their skills. Crucially, if changes are to be brought about, the initiative has to come from the teaching profession and the resource teacher can become a valuable link between the class teacher and other disciplines.

CASE STUDY 1: MARK FROM SPECIAL SCHOOL TO MAINSTREAM PLACEMENT

From an early age, Mark appeared to be unable to develop normal relations with people and situations and often displayed challenging behaviour. After consultation with the psychologist and the area medical officer, it was agreed that Mark was functioning in the mental handicap range and an appropriate placement would be the local special school for children with mild mental handicap.

After spending three years in the special school, the class teacher and educational psychologist who observed Mark believed that he might be ready to be integrated into mainstream schooling. Mark had no contact with a mainstream school before his transfer. He joined first class in his local primary school at the beginning of the following school year. He had great difficulty adapting to his new environment. Mark did not play with other children and was unable to cope with normal classroom work. He became disruptive in class and was very distractible. The classroom teacher had received no added support in dealing with Mark and became increasingly frustrated by his behaviour in class.

SUPPORT FROM PSYCHOLOGIST: PROGRAMMING

A meeting was held between the class teacher, Mark's parents and the school principal and it was decided that the educational psychologist should be

contacted with a view to discussing and assisting behavioural management.

The psychologist visited the school and worked with the class teacher in designing a programme for Mark. His parents were very co-operative and worked painstakingly with their son at home. Progress was slow but eventually Mark began to improve socially and became more independent in his personality. He developed a good sight vocabulary, but his comprehension and retention were well below his reading capacity. He had a poor understanding of order or sequencing. Mark was able to count and recognise numbers beyond the level at which he could perform number operations. He lacked understanding at the concrete level which made it impossible for him to successfully tackle new assignments without much help from the teacher. Even then any newly acquired skills were rarely retained.

Mark spent four years in the classroom without any form of remediation and as he moved from class to class it became increasingly difficult for him to succeed in mainstream. The classroom teachers were unable to provide the individualised instruction that Mark needed and felt that they were not receiving adequate support.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: ASSESSMENT

In 1994, a resource teacher was appointed to the area to cater for children with special educational needs who had been integrated into mainstream education. By now, Mark was in fifth class. The resource teacher initially conducted her own criterion-referenced assessment. Preliminary meetings between Mark's teacher and the resource teacher revealed differences in interpretations of the cause of Mark's learning difficulties. The class teacher's view was that Mark's problems were such that he required constant one-to-one teaching which she was unable to provide in a class of 35 children. The resource teacher felt that much of the difficulty arose from inappropriate programming. The maths scheme which the class was working on was considered to be beyond Mark's capabilities and totally unsuitable in his case. A result of this was that he was forever demanding his teacher's attention.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT

The resource teacher's immediate task was to provide work that Mark could do independently, thereby reducing the demands he made on his teacher. The programme of work that the two teachers agreed on was organised in such a way

that the class teacher would have to spend very little extra time with Mark. All the learning materials were prepared by the resource teacher and were mostly a self-contained package. They were to be used during those periods when the class teacher felt that Mark's inability to cope with school work caused him to present a significant management problem.

In following the same reading scheme as his peers, Mark was found to be working at a level which was much too difficult for him. Although he could master the mechanical reading skills, he had very little understanding of the text and had great difficulty completing any written tasks related to it. The resource teacher introduced Mark to a new reading scheme which was not familiar to him, and therefore he did not feel that he was working on a book which was more suited to younger children. The materials selected reflected Mark's interests and he found that he was able to complete the follow-up activities with very little assistance from his class teacher. Mark also kept his own reading book and liked to join the rest of the class at reading time.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: EVALUATION

Following the implementation of the programme, the resource teacher spent two one-hour sessions with Mark each week. During this time the resource teacher worked with Mark and prepared work which he could continue with in class until the next visit. At the end of each session the resource teacher and class teacher would discuss the specific programme of work to be followed with Mark.

The result of this kind of intervention led to a notable improvement in his social competency, attributable in part perhaps to an improvement in his self-esteem. One of the critical breakthroughs made as a result, was the modification of the class teacher's attitude towards Mark and his difficulties, through a growing realisation that his special needs could be met within the ordinary school. Mark's parents continue to work with him at home and hope that he will transfer to his local vocational school with the rest of his peers.

IDENTIFYING SPECIAL NEEDS 'LEARNING ECOLOGY'

The transfer for Mark from a special school into a mainstream school caused many problems. Teachers in America are using an ecological inventory (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994) to prepare students for moves from special schools into a mainstream setting. The classroom ecological inventory is an instrument which special and regular educators can use to identify important differences between

their classrooms that might impede the integration of students with special needs into mainstream classes.

During observations and in interviews, teachers record and discuss dimensions of their classrooms such as the physical arrangement, teacher-student interaction patterns, the teacher's management style, homework assignments, testing and grading policies, materials used and skills taught, and expectations for student's academic performance and behaviour. In short, the classroom ecological inventory facilitates description and discussion of salient features of the 'learning ecology'. Such analysis of classroom environments prior to a student's integration is important for at least two related reasons. Firstly, there is evidence that academic performance depends on more than the student's academic ability. Environmental factors such as the nature and quality of teacher-student interactions, curricula and materials also affect academic outcomes. Secondly, regular and special education classrooms tend to be dissimilar in terms of physical layout, instructional format, curricula, materials, teaching styles and expectations for student behaviour.

USING A CLASSROOM ECOLOGICAL INVENTORY

This disjunction makes it less likely that academic and social skills learned in special education will transfer to regular education. The classroom ecological inventory is important because it helps special and regular educators identify classroom differences that could threaten the integrated student's mainstream adaptation. Once identified these differences can be addressed by modifying aspects of special education, changing the regular classroom, or both. Perhaps resource teachers in Ireland should consider using an ecological inventory to prepare students like Mark for moves into mainstream settings.

CASE STUDY 2: HARRY INTEGRATING STUDENTS

When students with physical and health impairments enter the general education classroom, one of the teacher's first tasks is to learn about their disabilities. Other students must also become aware of the problems of special students and learn about ways of helping these students function as independently as possible. In addition, it may be necessary to adapt portions of the general education programme to allow full participation of students with physical and health impairments. The areas in which modifications are usually required are the arrangement of the physical environment and the format and structure of instructional activities and assignments.

SOCIAL COMPETENCE BUT ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES

Harry is a seven-year-old child. He had been in mainstream education for one year and was experiencing serious learning difficulties. Harry's teacher reported that he had inexplicably made no progress in any aspect of his school work other than oral work. He had considerable fine motor difficulties and was unable to cope with any written work. Harry did not display any social incompetencies. In fact the social sphere was an area of considerable strength for him and he was very popular among his peers. The physical environment of the school had been adapted to cater for Harry's needs. Although he was encouraged to walk as much as possible, Harry was permitted to take his tricycle into the school yard at break times. Since all classes were on ground level, mobility within the school was not a problem. The classroom was organised in such a way that it was a safe and comfortable place for Harry to work. Harry's teacher was aware that mere physical placement in a regular classroom was not enough to ensure academic achievement for the child. She had worked extremely hard with Harry but felt that more support was needed in the form of materials and personnel in order to provide the best possible education for him.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: BUILDING TEAM SUPPORT

By the time he entered his second year of schooling, Harry was receiving supplementary one-to-one instruction from the resource teacher. The resource teacher's first task was to arrange a meeting between the class teacher, the educational psychologist and the occupational therapist. It was necessary to build a co-operative interdisciplinary team that would work together. Without a co-ordinated effort, it was felt that each professional might see Harry in terms of her or his own perspective and it was therefore an important task of the resource teacher to integrate the various professional services to effect an understanding of the whole person. Once an assessment of the nature and extent of the child's learning difficulties had been made the next step was to decide on how best to assist him. This involved establishing a learning situation for Harry in which methods were not only tailored to his individual needs but also responsive to his particular strengths and weaknesses.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: CO-ORDINATING EFFORT

Letters were sent by all members of the interdisciplinary team to the Department of Education, recommending that Harry should be allocated a computer. It was felt that the computer would help him develop independence, self-help skills,

motor control, visual and auditory concepts, language skills and other pre-academic skills. Harry was granted a computer, which has also proved useful in encouraging social skills through co-operative computer activities.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Harry displayed great difficulty in concentrating for any length of time on a given task and was easily distracted by auditory and visual stimuli in his environment. It was therefore necessary to limit the extraneous stimuli to ensure that the physical setting be conducive to learning. When working independently, Harry was seated in a quiet corner of the classroom which was devoid of pictures or other distracting stimuli. He was also required to wear headphones which would block out any classroom noise. The goal of this space control was to increase slowly the amount of space with which Harry must contend. Gradually, it was hoped that he would internalise his own controls so that he would be able to work in an unmodified space environment. In the beginning, Harry was only required to work in this setting for very short periods, and this was gradually increased over time.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

The educational psychologist also encouraged the use of a reward system as a means of motivating Harry. The class teacher and resource teacher observed the effects of various reinforcements or rewards on Harry's behaviour. Harry's favourite reward was being allowed to play in the sand corner of the classroom. Therefore, each time Harry completed a given task he was presented with a token and when he had accumulated three tokens he was allowed to play in the sand for ten minutes. The resource teacher continued this reward system during her sessions with Harry.

The class teacher observed that Harry worked best in the mornings and was often very tired and listless in the afternoons. After consultations with Harry's parents and other professionals, it was agreed that for a while, Harry should only attend school for the morning session on days when he had appointments with his therapists. The therapy sessions were conducted in the afternoons, instead of after school hours. This led to a marked improvement in Harry's performance in school.

RESOURCE TEACHER HELP: PROGRAMME PLANNING

The resource teacher and class teacher agreed on a specific programme of work to be followed by Harry which included oral language, reading, writing and mathematics. The outcome of the intervention was that Harry began to progress slowly in all aspects of the programme. At the end of the school year, the class teacher, resource teacher and psychologist met with Harry's parents to review his situation. Although he was making satisfactory progress, Harry's academic achievement was well below that of his peers and his teacher feared that Harry would be unable to cope with the demands of the academic curriculum in first class. Harry's parents agreed that their child would benefit from spending another year in the infant classroom. He is now repeating his second year of schooling and his progress will be reviewed again at the end of the year. A meeting will then be held to discuss the appropriateness of Harry's present placement.

BALANCING REGULAR AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

In order to participate in an academic curriculum, Harry requires an inordinate amount of time and attention from the class teacher to a degree that it may be inequitable for the other children in the class. Clearly, we must strive to enable more children with learning disabilities to be served effectively in mainstream education by restructuring the regular-class settings. We must, however, strike a balance between our desire to integrate all students and our obligation to provide the intensity of services necessary for each child to reach his or her individualised educational goals. At present Harry receives two hours of individualised instruction from the resource teacher each week. We must examine whether the child will receive an educational benefit from mainstream education. We also must examine the child's overall educational experience in the mainstream environment, balancing the benefits of regular and special education.

CONCLUSION: RESOURCING FOR THE FUTURE

Integration has widespread support throughout the educational community. The Department of Education has sanctioned a number of resource teachers to help selected national schools cope with pupils with special educational needs on their rolls. A great deal of the special help required will inevitably be provided by the class teacher in the normal classroom situation. The direct involvement of other professionals should be commonplace forms of special help within the setting of

any well-organised school. In charting the way forward into the next century, the Special Education Review Committee Report (1993) recommends a need for regional special needs resource centres. It is envisaged that a number of shared resource teachers should be based in these centres. The resource centres should, preferably, be located in school buildings in local educational administrative areas. A school psychologist and, where appropriate, some Health Board support staff should be made available to each centre.

Integration will work for many but not for all individuals with learning difficulties. Learning difficulties range over a continuum and the provided services must match the severity of the disability. When provided with appropriate support, many individuals with learning difficulties are able to succeed in mainstream classrooms. Some students, however, require more extensive systematic instruction than can be provided in mainstream classrooms.

Clearly, we must strive to enable more students with learning difficulties to be served effectively in mainstream education by restructuring the class settings. We must, however, strike a balance between our desire to integrate all students and our obligation to provide the intensity of services necessary for each child to reach his or her individualised educational goals. Inclusion is not the only way to provide services for students with learning difficulties. "To be anti-full inclusion is not to be pro-exclusion, but instead to support appropriate, individualised educational programmes" (Lieberman, 1992, p. 23). As noted by Lieberman, the intent is not to question the ideals or philosophy of full inclusion, but rather to question the strategy for accomplishing those goals.

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