

Feature: Responding to the Report of the Special Education Review Committee

The SERC Report: Diverse Training or Training for Diversity?

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee published in October 1993 contains some specific suggestions for the training of teachers who will be involved in working with children who have special educational needs. Other recommendations included in the report also have significant, sometimes indirect, implications for the nature and content of such training. This article considers the impact the report might, and should have on future training for special needs and presents a possible model for the organisation of future in-service provision.

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NEED FOR MORE SPECIALIST IN-SERVICE TRAINING

The training of teachers in the area of special educational needs is seen by the Committee as a high priority for the future and this is set against what is seen as insufficient specialist training at present.

This insufficiency of training will be exacerbated by several of the general recommendations in the Report - for example: that, in future, all schools should have access to the services of support teachers; that the number of special classes, particularly at post-primary level, should be increased together with a reduction in the existing teacher-pupil ratios for such classes, and that a pattern of 'designated schools' be set up to provide support for groups of children in a locality with particular special needs.

Specialist courses already exist for some 'categories' of special educational needs, (hearing impairments and children with mental handicap for example), but in addition to these it is envisaged that in future specialist support teaching will also be more widely available for other 'categories' - pupils with specific learning disabilities (3.2.7), with specific speech and language problems (3.3.7), physical handicap (4.1.6), emotional and/or behavioural disorders (5.4.7) and autism (5.5.5). Existing specialist training will obviously need to be extended to cater for teachers working with these pupils.

In addition to the need for a general increase in provision, the Committee also recognises that the current pattern of provision means that there is a limited number of places available outside certain areas of the country. Greater equality of access to in-service provision in special education is seen as essential for the future.

CONTENT AND ORIENTATION OF IN-SERVICE COURSES

Another issue highlighted by the recommendations of the Report is the future content and orientation of such specialist in-service courses.

Chapter 7 of the report describes in some detail the pattern of provision envisaged for meeting special educational needs in the future. The models of services outlined in this chapter demand a variety of roles from all support teachers (designated as 'remedial teachers', 'resource teachers' and 'visiting teachers'), which extend beyond direct teaching to giving advice and devising resources, and beyond working with individuals and small groups to team teaching, in-class support, consulting with teachers and parents and liaising with external agencies (7.1.2). Future in-service courses for such teachers will need to address these new demands.

Special class teachers will be full members of school staffs in the future and will have an explicit role in facilitating greater academic and social integration for their pupils.

With greater integration existing special schools may be asked to meet the more severe and multiple special educational needs of a minority of pupils as well as becoming 'special education resource centres' - offering material resources to local schools, providing a base for resource teachers and a source of expertise for local in-service training provision. Greater links between special and ordinary schools are also recommended, including sharing specialist teaching expertise at

secondary level. Special school teachers will thus need to acquire new knowledge and develop new skills to take on these wider roles successfully.

TRAINING FOR DIFFERENT GROUPS OF TEACHERS

It is not only the training needs of specialist support teachers that need to be considered. Like the Warnock Report before it (Department of Education and Science, UK, 1978) the Report considers 'special educational needs' to be a broad concept encompassing a continuum from mild learning difficulties to more severe disabilities. The underlying philosophy of the report is to support greater functional integration of all such children into the curriculum and social life of ordinary schools wherever this is possible, matching this with the provision of a continuum of services.

The ordinary school will therefore be the context for the education of the majority of pupils with special educational needs and thus a greater number of class and subject teachers will inevitably become involved in teaching and supporting such pupils. This has significant implications for both pre-service and in-service training for *all* teachers.

The Report identifies a number of new roles for 'ordinary' schools in the future - including providing written policies for the initial identification and assessment of pupils with special educational needs (1.2.9), contributing reports to annual and final year assessments (1.2.18, 1.2.19 and 1.3.1), writing reports for and attending case conferences (1.2.13), liaising with staff in receiving schools and with external agencies (1.2.7 and 1.2.19) and communicating with and advising parents. It is suggested that these, together with coordinating additional support for particular pupils, would be primarily the responsibility of the principal or a 'named teacher'.

A number of teachers might be involved in developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills (3.1.4), in curricular innovations (2.3.1 and 6.3.7), in facilitating greater access to school resources and enabling greater social contact (2.3.2). It is also suggested that many teachers will need training in how better to meet the needs of economically and socially disadvantaged children (6.1.7) and general training is needed to raise awareness of the needs of minority groups (6.2.6).

Training will also be needed for 'special needs assistants', who, it is envisaged will be employed in the future in greater numbers and for a wider range of pupils.

CHANGE AND DIVERSITY: PRE-SERVICE TRAINING

Changes such as those recommended above will mean the involvement of all teachers, and require increased knowledge and new skills combined with significant changes in attitudes.

An important contribution to effective change will be the inclusion of special education elements on initial training courses. The Report recommends that Colleges and Education Departments include such elements in their training courses with the aim of equipping new teachers with the skills to administer and interpret appropriate tests, to cater better for the needs of children with general and specific learning difficulties (including some direct teaching experience), and to increase knowledge of disadvantage and of intercultural education.

NEW MODELS OF IN-SERVICE TRAINING

We can see from the earlier discussion that future in-service education in special educational needs, (i) has to be increased, (ii) has to be more widely available across the country, (iii) has to provide both general knowledge and skills, has to equip teachers for a range of new roles and demands, and (iv) has to meet the needs of different groups of teachers. The Report also recommends 'professional, competency based' courses which will lead to recognised qualifications and which make use of local resources and the expertise of local teachers.

Recognising the variety of demands that specialist courses will need to meet and that the needs of different groups overlap, the Committee recommends, as a start, coordinating aspects of some existing programmes which would involve some sharing of lectures (between primary and post-primary remedial groups for example), of workshops and facilities (para 2.3.2).

I believe that this approach can usefully be extended into a more general model for training and one which can meet the considerations outlined above both effectively and efficiently. In this model the 'content' of training for special educational needs is seen as a general 'core' of knowledge and skills appropriate for *all* teachers, which needs to be supplemented by a variety of specialist areas appropriate for different teachers working in different 'support' positions.

A MODULAR APPROACH

In-service courses would then consist of a number of modules, incorporating both diversity in content ('core general' and 'additional specialist' modules), and diversity in 'clients' (different numbers and combinations of modules leading to 'foundation' and 'specialist' qualifications appropriate to the different 'support' roles described in the report) (see Hegarty & Moses 1988).

The Remedial courses offered at University College, Galway already have elements of this model - the one-year part-time Certificate course is at foundation level and designed to meet the needs of ordinary class and subject teachers (and the 'named' teachers of the future). The second year leads to a University Diploma and both extends the general courses of the first year and includes a number of more specialist modules designed to meet the additional demands faced by the specialist remedial teacher.

To make provision more widely available the Report suggests including outreach and distance education. Distance education courses in special education have been established for some time elsewhere and have proved themselves to be flexible, effective and popular with teachers (Mason et al 1993). Both approaches can make excellent use of local teacher expertise (distance courses often have local teachers as 'mentors') and could easily be incorporated into a modular structure such as that described above.

CALL FOR WHOLE-SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITY

A final comment must be made about the reality of the situation that will face many of the teachers we work with once their training is completed. It is widely recognised that providing adequately for pupils with special educational needs in the context of increased integration is not just a question of appointing extra teachers, of making available additional support, of providing high quality specialist training or of introducing teachers to effective models of practice and the associated skills. Any serious policy of integration requires elements of reorganisation of the whole school and moves towards a 'whole school' responsibility for meeting the needs of children with special educational needs (Hegarty & Moses 1988, Swan & Leydon 1991). This requires real cooperation and change from *all* teachers. That such change is necessary and how it can be brought about will also need to be the concern of other in-service courses, especially those in educational administration and management for existing and aspiring principals.

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