

The Continuing Need For Residential Special Education

Residential schools for children with special needs must continue to be included in a wide range of special educational services. Shortcomings in community integration projects in Britain have caused many to re-evaluate the contribution of boarding schools in meeting special needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite headline-catching scandals and despite undoubted poor child care and education in some establishments, special boarding schools have had an enduring worth. We should also note that they grew in popularity as pioneer attempts a century ago at day care and community based approaches, albeit unrefined by modern standards, and proved to have severe limitations for some children with special needs.

A look at the development of residential special education indicates why in the modern era of integration and community care, boarding education became and remains a practical and desirable option for some children and a necessity for others.

THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF SPECIAL BOARDING SCHOOLS

In the 1860s Robert Gladstone was the President of the Manchester School for the Deaf, one of the pioneering and still prospering residential schools for deaf children in England; maximum school fees at that time were 3 s. 6d a week (Nelson and Lunt, 1923). He had a somewhat more famous brother - William Ewart Gladstone, four times Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and in his later career, doughty fighter for Irish Home Rule. William was also concerned with helping Irish special education. On 1st March 1868 he pressed the House of Commons to give government money to the Irish special institutions:

"I am not now speaking", he said, "of Institutions in which the Deaf, Dumb and Blind

are to be mewed up for life, but simply of schools in which they may receive that kind of instruction which they are capable of receiving for their own benefit, to prepare them to go out into the world to play their part as Providence permits them - as useful members of society." (Anon., 1877).

Clearly, a concern for the integration as adults of those with disabilities existed among our forebears, at the highest levels of society, a century or more ago. Gladstone perhaps agreed with the Headmaster of Claremont School for the deaf, writing in his annual report published in Dublin in 1888, that special institutions such as Claremont were the "only key" opening up "the busy world of thought and work".

EARLY EFFORTS AT INTEGRATION

Some, however, at this time, also had faith in out-and-out childhood integration. In 1868, educationalists in central Scotland got down seriously to trying to integrate blind children into the ordinary day schools. This was later copied in London and elsewhere. Partial integration of blind children lasted in Glasgow until the Second World War and in London for some partially sighted children, until the 1930s. Echoing integration/segregation debates and practice in America, Germany, France and elsewhere, many late Victorians tried very hard to make integration work. Sometimes, as in Glasgow, it was full functional integration but more commonly, partial integration by way of special classes set in mainstream schools. However, by about 1914, most professionals while still hoping to keep the mildly handicapped, in mainstream schools realised the hopelessness of meeting the needs of some children with more severe difficulties other than in separate special schools staffed by teachers with empathy for the special child and hopefully, experience and expertise. Such special children had to be brought to the few experts which often necessitated boarding, rather than to try to spread the few experts' time thinly and ineffectively around the special children scattered around the normal day schools as had happened and might again be occurring today.

SEGREGATIONIST TRENDS

In London between the 1870s and 1914 there was first the creation of special classes attached to ordinary schools for the deaf and blind and then the progressive amalgamation of these small units into large, specialist centres. At the same time, extended attempts were made to foster children with special needs or to house them in special hostels near day schools but these generally foundered. Then in London

after 1900, there was the development of state-run residential schools to provide the life-skills and trade-training needed to prepare the teenagers for an integrated and, as Gladstone had hoped, useful and satisfying life as adults. An increasing degree of childhood segregation was believed to be necessary to achieve a greater degree of adult integration (Cole, 1989).

This was the policy. Perhaps the quality of the resulting schools, constrained as ever by dire financial circumstances, was sometimes poor. Too many children may well (to use Gladstone's words) have been "mewed up"; a few children might have been consciously "put away" in distant boarding schools - providing some support for the distorted and inaccurate view of the development of British special education put forward by Sally Tomlinson (Tomlinson, 1982), Julienne Ford (Ford et al, 1982) and other members of the social control/capitalist interests school (see Cole, 1990). However, study of contemporary evidence does not show that the policy was to put children out-of-sight and out-of-mind (Cole, 1989).

THE 1944 EDUCATION ACT

The real boom in residential special education of course, happened in the quarter century following the English and Welsh Education Act of 1944. This was when the belief was strongest that children were best helped towards a self-supporting, independent adulthood in open society if educated from an early age by a concentrated group of experts in special schools big enough to group children with similar problems in classes according to age and ability. The history of special education, with its often failed attempts at outright integration and the constant difficulties ordinary class teachers had experienced in trying to meet the needs of the handicapped had naturally led contemporary experts to this view.

Since there were so few children with severe special needs - and their homes so widely dispersed - in most of the eleven official categories created by the 1944 Education Act - boarding education was essential if the few, fairly large centres of expertise were to be developed. For more numerous groups, such as those designated educationally subnormal (ESN) or physically handicapped, boarding might well be desirable as much for social as educational reasons. The history of special education emphasises the social work function of residential schools from the earliest days and the social work function of boarding schools is perhaps the strongest reason for the existence of the majority of residential schools today.

Increasingly, however, worries grew about remoteness from the children's homes and the lack of contact between home and school. Also there was the increasing spectre of John Bowlby and his concerns on separating young children from their mothers which certainly contributed to less children under eight being sent to board. But these growing doubts did not prevent the phenomenal growth in this field.

RECENT TRENDS

A peak was reached in 1975 when about 30,000 children were in English and Welsh state, voluntary and independent boarding special schools. This figure has now shrunk to a little over 20,000.

The futile attempt of the British government to end categorisation and labelling brought about an unhelpful change in the presentation of their statistics in 1984 which makes it impossible to chart recent changes. However, between 1973 and 1983, the statistics showed the following:

- the number of educationally sub-normal (ESN) boarders declined by about 44%;
- the physically handicapped and delicate boarders declined by 50%;
- the deaf and partially-hearing boarders declined by 38%;
- the blind and partially sighted boarders declined by 35%.

Moves towards integration were clearly playing their part. But off-setting this was a numerically substantial growth by 30% in the numbers of maladjusted children. There was also growth in boarding provision for children with severe learning difficulties and speech defects (Cole, 1986).

Also worthy of note is Anderson and Morgan's finding in their wide ranging survey in 1986/7 that 38% of special boarding schools were experiencing greater demand for places and 28% reported no fall in the number of referrals. The clear impression is that despite the virtual monopoly of the press by fervent supporters of integration who have often been against residential schools, boarding schools still have many supporters throughout Great Britain. More recently the usefulness of boarding schools has been recognised in the 1978 Warnock and the 1985 Fish Reports. Despite past and recent attempts to provide local, community based, integrated alternatives in the nineteenth century as well as in the later twentieth century, many residential schools continue to flourish.

WHO ATTENDS SPECIAL BOARDING SCHOOLS?

First, there is a numerically small and decreasing number of children who have physical or sensory impairments. No suitable local day special provision is available and both education officers and parents accept that these youngsters' educational needs cannot be met in their local day schools. Or, perhaps increasingly, the parents have been dissatisfied by the integrated or semi-integrated provision on offer and have pressed their education authority to fund their child at a residential school with a reputation for excellence (Chapman and Stone, 1988). These boys and girls are likely to attend well resourced regional centres of expertise generously staffed and specially adapted to the needs of the particular clientele they serve.

For these pupils, the residential side of boarding school life is a necessary but definitely subservient feature. They attend the school primarily for educational and in the case of some physically impaired children, for medical reasons. Whenever possible pupils only sleep on the premises on Monday through to Thursday night and they do this because it is too far for them to travel home each night to their families. Their physical or sensory impairments are not compounded by serious behavioural, home or other social reasons which characterize a second much larger group of children some of whom attend the same special boarding schools as the first group.

For the majority of boarders however, providing a suitable education is not the primary reason for their placement. The proliferation of day special schools and classes since the mid-fifties and more recently units attached to ordinary schools in their stead for children with moderate learning difficulties has brought special provision within easy reach of nearly all such pupils' homes. Gone are the days, except in a few remote areas, when the slow learning child, like the sensory impaired, had to board to receive suitable teaching.

SHORTCOMINGS OF COMMUNITY INTEGRATION ALTERNATIVES

The majority of children in residential special education have emotional and behavioural difficulties possibly in addition to other special needs and they probably come from complicated and disadvantaged home backgrounds. It is likely that a range of community based interventions will have been tried and found wanting with the children and their families before boarding was considered.

Fostering is greatly favoured as a means of keeping youngsters in day schools and sometimes this works well. For more difficult children professional fostering with

enhanced payments and fuller training and back-up for the fosterers, has been encouraged. But in the 1980s as in the 1880s the supply of good foster parents has not matched demand, and prospects for the 1990s are said to be worse as existing foster parents "age out" and younger potential fosterers are drawn by labour shortages back into the financially more attractive and less stressful conventional labour market. This trend is already said to be apparent just as child population is starting to rise again (Berridge, 1989).

Also to be stressed is the resistance of some difficult teenagers to being fostered. They simply do not take to the close relationships required by some fosterers or cannot accept the rules and traditions of the receiving family. They prefer the wider, diffused relationships required of them in a larger children's home or residential school. So not surprisingly Jane Rowe's recent study found that only 15% of all adolescent placements were with foster families (Berridge, 1989; Waterhouse, 1989).

THE PROS AND CONS OF RESIDENTIAL SPECIAL EDUCATION

1. Boarding, it is claimed, splits the child from his family, and interferes with the natural pattern of a child growing up with his parents, brothers and sisters.

For the child from a loving, stable family, not undergoing intense stresses which characterise the families of so many special boarders, this may be true. However, residential schools can ensure that through frequent weekends at home, holidays and communication by phone and letter, parent and child keep 'in tune' with each other and the youngster does not feel rejected.

If the family is under severe pressure, and parent and child perhaps have an uneasy relationship which is full of conflict and problems, then term times apart can help to create a happier, healthier relationship and rekindle dormant affection. If difficulties within the family are not resolved, at least periods apart relieve pressure and give the children a chance to grow up and to develop their own personality and interests in an environment which will be free from the trauma associated with home, and which perhaps better meets their emotional and social needs. This will be achieved without stigmatising the child or parents as much as taking him or her into the care of the local authority.

2. Boarding, it is said, isolates a child from his local community.

In most cases, this may be true. But are some children with physical disabilities ever

truly integrated into their local community given the location of their houses, and the extent of their handicaps? The Warnock Committee recognised that some severely handicapped children might have to board in order to receive a reasonable range of "recreational and leisure opportunities". The maladjusted child from a tangled family background who has been negatively labelled and rejected by the other children and families in his neighbourhood might also be isolated. Such children can find companionship in boarding school and make lasting friendships. Even if these can only be enjoyed during term time, might these not better meet their needs than a lonely life at home and possibly at day school?

3. Boarding denies a pupil, mixing and growing up with local children in ordinary day school.

This statement suggests that the child would be happy in an ordinary day school and benefit from the experience. In fact the majority of boarders with special needs have spent many years in integrated educational settings, have not enjoyed the experience, have been isolated, or have been labelled 'failures' by staff and peers, have fallen behind in lessons and sometimes shown disruptive behaviour or played truant. In contrast, many prosper in the small, segregated environment of the residential special school and many have little wish to be re-integrated.

If such children had remained in a day setting their continuing isolation and rejection could have been very damaging to their development. It has yet to be proven that mixing children without handicap with pupils with special needs, increases the sympathy and understanding of the former for the latter and some evidence suggests the contrary (Gresham, 1982; Cole, 1989).

4. Small boarding schools, cannot provide the width and variety of the ordinary secondary school curriculum.

For some children this is true but there are a few generously staffed and larger residential schools of the grammar school type for bright children with physical and sensory disabilities to counteract this criticism. Some schools for the maladjusted are geared up for the brightest children or arrange for pupils to attend local day schools for subjects not adequately covered by the school's own staff.

In some instances, the well-run residential school's concentrated special facilities, homogeneous teaching groups and additional staffing enables the curriculum to be more effectively tailored to individual learning and self-esteem needs, enhancing a pupil's opportunities and achievement. Most residential special schools seem

confident that they can provide the appropriate levels of the new National Curriculum in all the required subjects.

5. The special boarding school, can cocoon a child in an overprotected community, divorced from the harsh reality of the outside world.

Sometimes, this may be so. Boarding schools must attack this tendency, by adopting curricula which keep pupils in touch with the wider world preparing them for leaving. The best schools make a good attempt at this by well thought out life-skills programmes, work experience, involvement of pupils in the local community as well as maintaining and nurturing the child's links with his family and home area.

6. Attending a special boarding school might lessen a youngster's employment prospects.

Empirical evidence on this topic, as on many others, is lacking, but it can be argued that the stigma attached by local employers (and also by parents) to a child attending a special class, on-site special unit or the local 'daft' (mild learning disabilities) school can be much greater than his attending a school at some distance from home, which is not well known in a child's neighbourhood and does not have the perhaps unflattering local reputation of the day alternatives. Before mass youth unemployment, attendance at Approved Schools did not seem to harm a youngster's job prospects. Furthermore, many boarding schools have well-developed work experience schemes and school based life and work skills programmes which prepare leavers for the world of work. Good schools will also devote time and energy travelling to and from the leaver's home town helping to fix him or her up with a further education course or full time job or youth employment scheme as effectively, possibly more so, than an average comprehensive school. The fact that other children have gone to boarding school and regularly received good teaching is also likely to have helped them to success in national exams which will also aid the search for work.

CONCLUSION

Some parents naturally fight against their child being sent to a boarding school. Historical sources show they always have, and for very understandable reasons they always will. But what is less frequently publicised are the many parents who reluctantly accept the notion of boarding, but then find their distrust melting away. Soon they are keen supporters of the school.

Residential schools for children with different special needs must continue to be

included in a wide range of special educational services. Of course, provision in the mainstream must be encouraged for as many children as possible and boarders who will benefit from re-integration should transfer back when family circumstances allow. However, a clear lesson of history is that in an imperfect world boarding schools clearly meet the needs of some children better than other options.

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