The Changing Role of the Teacher in Integrating Children with Special Needs

The successful integration of children with special needs into ordinary schools requires the development of the teacher's role as "Change Agent". Supported by a whole school policy, the expertise to implement integrational aims may be already present in the school.

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NEW ROLES FOR TEACHERS

The question as to the teachers' role in integrating pupils with special needs can be answered in at least three ways. One short answer is that the teachers' role is crucial. As the only professionals with the legitimate right to teach pupils at school, any policy of integration must succeed or fail, depending upon the teachers' actions and intentions.

Secondly, in the sense that there always have been pupils with special needs (i.e. individual learner needs) in mainstream classrooms, the teachers' role is to continue to recognise and provide for such needs, though more recently, additionally to provide for a wider range of learner needs. In other words, at primary school, what a teacher is asked to be is a good *generalist* class teacher, and at secondary school a good 'subject' teacher.

In attaining this goal, the class teacher is also being asked to extend her/his range of professional contacts and interactions to include not only pupils, but also parents, as well as colleagues and other professionals.

In a third sense, teachers have been asked to take on roles that are new and different. Thus, the posts of Special Needs coordinator or Learning Support Teacher, or of 'curriculum leader' as required for implementation of the National Curriculum, involve taking on a *specialist* role. Such posts carry with them additional duties and responsibilities - duties and responsibilities which are different in kind from those

of a class or 'subject' teacher.

GENERALIST TEACHER

In order to comprehend the magnitude of what is being asked of a teacher, the true nature of what is being asked of her/him as a *generalist* has to be recognised. Thus, consideration of the range and complexity of what the teacher has to do as a generalist or 'subject' teacher reveals a formidable job description. For example, as far as primary classteachers are concerned:

> "The diversity and range of curricular tasks, and of children encountering them, is such as to make enormous demands on primary teachers' pedagogic capacities: their diagnostic and assessment skills; their ability to organise with equal competence learning programmes in language, mathematics, science, art and so on; and to devise within these programmes specific tasks appropriate to their pupils' varying levels of achievement and potential; to have a sense of how the parts mesh and balance, not just within a subject, but between them - a 'whole curriculum' capacity" (Alexander, 1990, p.3).

The job of secondary teaching is equally complex, though in different ways.

TEACHERS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

However, in addition to being the 'superperson' described above - and in order to achieve the additional goals being set - some teachers, particularly in primary schools, have become significant Agents of Change, most notably in home-school relations and parental involvement. In some cases, parental involvement is limited to 'paired reading' schemes, in others it involves parents working alongside the teacher in the classroom. Furthermore, in some schools, teacher-parent cooperation has moved from being teacher controlled (the 'expert' model), through parents being seen as a resource (the 'transplant' model), to seeing parents as having rights and teachers being open with them (the 'consumer' model) (Freeman and Gray, 1989).

CURRICULUM LEADER

The role of 'Curriculum Leader' in a primary school or Head of Department in a secondary school involves *specialist* responsibility for developing within their curriculum area, the schemes of work, resources, teaching methods (pedagogy) and assessment techniques, relevant to the full range of learner needs, and also being

responsible for meeting the in-service training INSET needs of colleagues within the school. In this aspect of their work, then, such teachers are again in the role of Change Agents, and insofar as they are responsible for helping themselves and colleagues, through INSET, to meet the full range of learner needs, they are also responsible for enabling effective integration to take place.

There is, then a valuable area of overlap between the school-wide responsibilities of Special Needs Coordinators or Learning Support Teachers and those of Curriculum Leaders or Heads of Department.

DEVELOPMENT OF NECESSARY SKILLS

In order to bring about appropriate change, teachers with 'special needs' or curriculum responsibilities have to develop three kinds of knowledge, understanding and skills:

1   knowledge and understanding of effective assessment of learner needs, of teaching-learning processes, of the principles of curriculum provision, and in some cases, of parental and multi-professional cooperation, in relation to the full range of 'individual learner needs'; and

2   specific ('hard') skills in assessment, strategies for teaching, and curriculum design and delivery to pupils with the full range of 'individual learner needs'; and,

3   generic ('soft') skills necessary to change attitudes, to encourage confidence, competence and a sense of self-efficacy among colleagues, and to encourage cooperation with parents, employers and the community, and with other professionals who work with young people (Campbell 1985, ch.3).

Thus, the interpersonal skills of being able to get on with other adults, of team building, of managing meetings, and of effective leadership are crucially important areas of competence for teachers in their specialist role.

Such personal development can, however, only be effective within the context of a whole school policy of providing for 'individual learner needs'. Thus, the goal of the necessary change, namely 'good practice',

> "..is most likely to be advanced when all members of staff are committed to the same aims: providing a broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated curriculum, and raising standards for each of the pupils they teach. A

united school policy on special educational needs will begin with leadership from the head and governing body. It will be constructed by members of the school staff, working closely with parents, LEA support staff, health and social services, and the wider community" (NCC, 1989, p.3).

CHANGES IN ATTITUDES, CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

It is, perhaps, valuable to think of the changes that teachers, in their role of Change Agents, have brought about and continue to bring about, in terms of (a) attitudes, (b) curriculum, and (c) teaching strategies or pedagogy.

As far as attitudes are concerned, detectable changes have occurred in relation to parents and other professionals, to the fellow teachers themselves, and of course, in interactions with and between pupils. Specifically, teachers have moved away from a deficit approach to pupils, with its over-emphasis on within-child characteristics, towards a more positive non-deficit approach, which recognises that schools can cause pupils to have learning difficulties - and that by the same token, schools can prevent learning difficulties. There is also less emphasis on the 'average' and more on the individual, which is leading to recognition of the need to balance attention to learning difficulty with attention on ensuring learning facility.

Changes resulting in more positive attitudes to self and others have contributed to, and resulted from the model of a teacher as the only adult in her/his classroom, and in which s/he does not collaborate with other teachers, giving way to one in which each teacher is a member of a team as well as being a specialist in her/his own professional or curriculum area, willing and able to share her/his expertise with colleagues. In this way, barriers are beginning to be broken down with individual teachers, who perhaps had a low regard for what they do, coming to be recognised for the contribution they make, and thereby replacing self-doubt with a sense of self-efficacy. Changes in these personal characteristics are evident also among pupils who have disabilities and learning difficulties and who are in or associated with 'mainstream' schools, though for many pupils there is still a long way to go.

Within the curriculum whilst the importance of training in basic skills is still recognised as important for pupils with learning difficulties, it is recognised that, in order to be effective, learning should occur within meaningful educational contexts, such as topic or project work. If learning can take place through meaningful tasks, with heterogeneous groupings of pupils, hopefully in situations in which pupils with

difficulties in one area can receive help from and give help to fellow pupils, and be taught by parents as well as teachers in the classroom, it is likely to be effective both in cognitive and dispositional terms. In this way, open-ended (educational) tasks can replace closed-ended, training-type activities, sterile, intrinsically uninteresting, de-motivating tasks, replaced by stimulating, optimal and collaborative learning activities.

EXPERT TEACHERS

In relation to teaching strategies, teachers are now coming to see themselves as *expert* teachers, and rather than relying on external 'expertise' are recognising the significance of learning processes as well as the products of learning, are placing greater emphasis on pupils' strengths as the starting point for any intervention, and are placing greater emphasis on cooperative learning rather than learning in isolation.

With greater emphasis on integration - whether it involves a pupil with 'moderate learning difficulties' working in her/his 'mainstream' classroom, integration of pupils with profound hearing impairment for a particular learning activity, or a special needs coordinator working with a pupil with a significant learning difficulty alongside her/his colleague in the same classroom - remedial education at the periphery of the school is giving way to learning support being provided centrally. In succeeding in changing 'mismatch to the average' into 'match to the individual', the teacher can now call upon the support of her/his colleagues for advice and help, so that teachers can offer and receive specialist help in a particular professional or curriculum area. Furthermore, with greater emphasis on behaviourally-based assessment and inter-staff communication about pupils, intervention can be based on objective data and can occur at the level of the whole child.

CRITERIA FOR CHANGE

The extent to which change has been brought can be measured in relation to practical questions about attitudes, the learning environment, and schemes of work.

PUPILS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGING ROLES

From the pupils' perspectives, the attitude dimensions include evidence of:
Positive attitudes from school staff;
Partnerships with teachers who encourage them to become active learners;
A climate of warmth and support in which self-confidence and self-esteem

can grow;
Emphasis on profiles of achievement which encourage self-assessment and Home-school partnerships (NCC, 1989):

CHANGES IN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In relation to the learning environment these include an atmosphere of encouragement, acceptance, respect for achievements and sensitivity to individual needs, classroom layout and appearance which will stimulate pupil-teacher interaction and adjustment to changing curricular needs; easy access to resources; flexible grouping of pupils; management of pupil behaviour through a whole-school approach to discipline; cooperative learning among pupils; communication and cooperation among staff and with governors.

SCHEMES OF WORK

In relation to schemes of work, the questions include:

Do the schemes of work set out the aims and objectives for the curriculum area in question?

Can tasks and activities for any one attainment level be chosen and presented to enable children with a wide range of attainments to experience success? For instance, emphasis on oral rather than written work...

Can activities be matched to pupils' differing paces and styles of learning, interests capabilities and previous experience; can time and order of priority be allocated accordingly?

Can the activities be broken down into series of small and achievable steps for pupils who have marked learning difficulties?

Will the activities stretch pupils of whom too little may have been expected in the past? These pupils are likely to include some with physical, sensory or other impairments who are high attainers.

Can a range of communication methods be used with pupils with language difficulties?
Will the purpose of the activities and the means of achieving them be understood and

welcomed by pupils with learning difficulties?

Are cross-curricular themes, including personal and social education, running through the programmes of study in foundation subjects?

Do the schemes refer to material resources, and to their financial implications?

How will teaching and, where available, non-teaching and support staff be deployed?

Are there clear school-wide procedures on recording and evaluating pupil progress?

FACILITATING CHANGE

In order to facilitate these changes, there is the need to recognise that individual responsibility must be complemented by shared responsibility, that individual approaches to solving problems must be complemented by whole school approaches, so that ineffective efforts can become effective. Coupled with this, there is the need for self-appraisal and appraisal by others, such that undervaluing of self in teaching and interpersonal skills gives way to recognition of one's own expertise, and replacement of negative self-attitudes gives way to positive ones.

In practical terms, this means coming to recognise the staff and other resources (including parents) that a school has at its disposal - (a) strengths, in terms of particular staff expertise, school resources, parents' time; (b) weaknesses, in terms of expertise, resources, etc. that the school needs, (c) constraints, such as time and material resources, and (d) opportunities, such as the interest of a particular member of staff in developing an area identified in (b).

Weaknesses identified in (b) can be dealt with in one of three ways: (i) use of 'official' structures - courses and qualifications offered by colleges and universities or by Teachers' Centres - these are an important and continuingly necessary source of support because their staff have the opportunity not only to see a wide spectrum of 'good practice', but also are able to reflect upon and evaluate critically different methods and approaches that are developed; (ii) self-help within the school (sometimes with initial input and/or evaluation by college, university or Teachers' Centre staff), and (iii) self-help involving two or more schools.

The value of these two latter kinds of INSET is perhaps not obvious at first. It is

evident, however, that a wide range of expertise exists, if not within a single school, at least within a small group of schools, such that many of the weaknesses identified in (b) can be dealt with by using the opportunity (d) to build upon individual staff strengths (a).

CONCLUSIONS

What is clear, then, is the significant effect that teachers have already had in enabling and facilitating the integration of a wider range of pupils into 'mainstream' schools or units associated with such schools. What is also clear is that, whilst teachers have received a measure of support through 'official' structures - much of which has been of very high quality, but (assuming the evolution of a 'cascade' model of INSET) limited to a relatively small proportion of teachers - the bulk of the credit for success must be attributed to the teachers themselves. In other words, expertise already present in school - perhaps in a dormant or nascent state - has been encouraged and allowed to develop, with the success in providing for individual learner needs that is evident in many, many schools.

The time is right, then, for teachers to take stock of what they have achieved, and to recognise both their achievements and areas in which, with external and self-help, they can further achieve the goal of ensuring greater equality of opportunity for all pupils.

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