

# Developing a Resource Programme within a Special School

**Increasingly, special schools need to develop internal support systems and resource facilities in order to accommodate effectively the widening diversity of the special needs of children attending such schools. A project in a Dublin special school is described and evaluated.**

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## INTRODUCTION

St. Augustine's School caters for students with mild learning difficulties. However, among the student population, there are widely differing needs including intellectual, social, emotional, and behavioural. Given the diversity and intensity of these needs, it may not always be possible to provide the necessary support within the classroom. St. Augustine's has over the years, attempted to develop projects to maximise support for students with particular needs.

As a part of such planning, a resource programme was developed in January 1989, to provide support for students and teachers at the middle level of the school. Six classes at this level (age range 9-13 years) were viewed as a priority for a number of reasons. Firstly, this area of the school caters for the greatest number of students which implies, in general terms that this level would have the highest concentration of students with specific needs.

Secondly, many of the students are experiencing the on-going problems associated with adolescence, and it was felt that they might benefit from working without distraction in small group situations, partaking in activities not usually available in class, and receiving additional input for students' individual weaknesses. Thirdly, at this level of the school, especially in the lower classes, students had limited access to practical subjects.

## INITIAL ORGANISATION

The formation of a resource team was one of the first steps in setting up the programme. It met weekly and was comprised of the resource teacher, two school based psychologists, and a school based social worker, all of whom were directly involved with the students. The team's function was to plan, implement, and evaluate a suitable programme. Its responsibilities included:



- the identification of areas of special need and the design of a suitable framework through which teachers could express their perceived needs and refer students whom they felt might benefit from inclusion in the programme;
- the final selection of students for the programme and the placement of students in an appropriate activity or activities;
- the updating of class teachers and other colleagues directly involved with students attending the programme.

After consultation with class teachers, the format of the programme was decided upon. There has been much contradictory research praising and criticising the practice of withdrawing students from their regular classrooms. However, it was felt that such a system would operate well in St. Augustine's and a resource classroom was established to accommodate homogeneous groups of students.

In addition, the resource teacher would be available to four classes for one hour per week to take a group (usually half the class). This facilitated the class teachers in working with smaller groups. The resource teacher could also assist class teachers with class outings, class quizzes etc.

Poor communication skills, lack of confidence, aggressive and defiant behaviour, specific reading problems, and difficulty in relating to peers were the areas which teachers highlighted as requiring specific input. All agreed that the resource programme should be developed to improve students' skills in relation to these areas of concern. Teachers referred a total of thirty-six children out of a possible eighty-nine. The resource team met on a number of occasions to review the needs of the students referred and to try and select suitable activities to meet these needs. Six specific activities were selected: Drama, Water Safety, Project, Fretwork, Reading Skills, and Games.

### **PROGRAMME IN OPERATION**

The benefits of drama to passive and withdrawn children has been well chronicled (McClintock, 1984; Jennings, 1983). The Drama group comprised of four children who had been described by class teachers as "poor communicators" and "lacking in confidence". These students attended for a one hour period twice a week. The sessions centered on language development through mime, story, and the use of a tape-recorder. Emphasis was also placed on the development of social skills through the rehearsal of situations which students might consider threatening.

Swimming is considered an important element of the curriculum in the school. Students in the post-primary school take part in water-polo and canoeing activities. The inclusion of a water safety programme was considered beneficial in developing a general awareness of the concept of 'safety' and in encouraging responsible attitudes to water-based activities. The Water Safety Group attended land drill sessions which discussed various aspects of water safety, environmental hazards, swimming rules, etc. Where possible, this work was reinforced with art, mime and written work. The pool sessions introduced the students to practical elements of water safety with particular emphasis on personal safety, non-contact rescues, self discipline, and responsibility to the other members of the group.



Students achieved the standards required for the Safety 2 Award of the National Safety Council.

The Project group aimed at providing the selected students with some basic manual skills and fostering group co-operation. All students in this group had particular needs in relation to completing relatively simple tasks. Using scissors, pasting, colouring, tracing, and writing, were all skills which were practised by the students working on a topic of their choice. This was integrated with visits to places of interests associated with the project topic.

Fretwork was an extremely popular woodworking hobby from the early 1900s right up to the 1950s. It involves cutting intricate designs in wood using a light saw with a very fine blade. Despite its drop in popularity, fretwork has many useful applications in the primary school and fretsaws, blades, and other accessories are still readily available.

It was considered as an activity for disruptive and energetic students as it helps develop concentration for set periods of time, directs physical energy into creative work, and requires only minimal manual dexterity. More importantly, it provides impressive and immediate results - an important factor with students with limited concentration skills. In addition, fretwork helps develop the skills of measuring, sawing, sanding, varnishing, etc., - all good preparation for the student who may well partake in a woodwork programme within the school. A wide variety of patterns, colouring books, magazines, etc., provided the students with ideas for items to make. Wooden jigsaws, simple toys, picture frames, and even an intricate model dinosaur were among the many items students made. A total of twelve students attended two 90 minute classes each week, and a selection of the students' work was displayed at the school's annual Work Training Exhibition.

### **DEVELOPING READING SKILLS**

Seven students were referred to the programme for specific reading difficulties. Having tested the students there appeared two distinct categories. A group of four younger students had failed to master particular reading skills. Diagnostic assessment by the psychologists outlined very specific difficulties and suggested the appropriate teaching strategies to be employed. The *Ginn 360* programme was used as this was the reading scheme being followed in class. Letter identification, word-picture matching, word recognition, and comprehension skills were developed and tested with the aid of computer software programmes.

The second group of these students was older and was still experiencing great difficulty with very basic skills. The team devised a list of important social sight words and symbols commonly found in the environment. The two sessions per week centered mainly around familiarising the students with these words and symbols followed by regular trips to local shopping centres etc. to test their acquisition of the vocabulary.

There is a vast quantity of literature endorsing the value of play. Many of the children referred experienced difficulty with sharing, accepting, winning and losing, and playing simple games in a non-confrontative fashion. Others had difficulty understanding the playing rules of simple board games such as Draughts,



Snakes and Ladders, and Ludo. Some lacked the confidence to try games such as table football and snooker which are available to students during their lunch time. The Games Group attempted to assist the students in overcoming these difficulties. Six pupils attended twice per week. Group co-operation, working in pairs, and sharing, were all values which were encouraged through a wide selection of games. Students themselves undertook to organise a number of knock-out competitions and leagues within the group.

The preceding paragraphs describe the resource teacher's work with groups which were comprised of students from different classes. However, as mentioned, the resource teacher was also available to take a group from four individual classes. This arrangement facilitated the class teacher in doing group-work with the smaller number of children who remained in class. The content of the sessions in the resource room was largely decided upon by the class teacher. Activities included group discussion, artwork, computer studies, comprehension skills, and reinforcement of work already completed in class

The timetable was sufficiently flexible to ensure that the resource teacher was available during periods when students had free time in the yard. Therefore, when a student was particularly disruptive and aggressive over a period of time, he attended the resource room instead of going out to play. He then earned a "trial" day on the yard and if successful was readmitted but his behaviour was closely monitored for a set period.

### **DIFFICULTIES**

As might be expected, the programme experienced problems and difficulties. Initially, the resource programme was difficult to timetable. Being from different classes, students attended other out of class activities. (e.g. pottery, P.E., swimming) at different times and therefore it was difficult to find periods when all members of a group were available. Secondly, since the resource teacher was working with children from six different classes, it was difficult to liaise regularly with class teachers on an individual basis and report on student progress. Another difficulty encountered was that in the early stages, teachers were occasionally tempted to use a student's attendance at the resource programme as a disciplinary sanction. Happily, as the first term progressed, teachers resisted the temptation and students attended regardless of their prior application and behaviour in class.

### **EVALUATION**

Although the programme operated only for a six month period from January to June 1989 - a variety of techniques were used to evaluate the programme.

A series of student checklists was drawn up for each of the groups. Each checklist identified specific skills, and desired behaviour for each activity.

These checklists were completed by the resource teacher in January and were useful in setting objectives for individual students. These checklists were completed again six months later and provided information on any significant change in students' skills acquisition or behaviour. Fretwork, water safety and drama, were all groups which scored highly on the second checklist.



A less significant change was noted in the project and reading checklists. However, these were viewed as reasonably successful, especially in view of the differing needs of the students. No significant changes were noted in the scores of the Games group.

Similarly a student self-esteem questionnaire was administered in January and June. Although there appeared to be no apparent correlation between an increase in self-esteem and attendance at a specific activity, the overall self-esteem of students attending the programme increased significantly.

A social skills questionnaire (Spence, 1980) and the *Bristol Emotional Adjustment Guide* (Stott, 1971) were completed on each student by class teachers. Results from both tests were disappointing and inconclusive. Such inconclusive results raised questions regarding the relevance of the measures chosen. A student attending the resource programme, would also be receiving input from his class teacher, parents or guardian and perhaps the school psychologist or social worker. Because of such variables it was most difficult to attribute a student's progress solely to his attendance in the programme.

More subjective measures yielded more positive results. All class teachers directly involved completed a questionnaire requesting feedback on their perception of the programme. All responded positively and described how they felt individual students had benefitted. All were in favour of the programme continuing.

All of the students were interviewed individually to ascertain their attitudes regarding whether they found the programme interesting, enjoyable, whether they liked attending and whether they liked the other members of their group. All comments were most favourable except for a small minority who stated they did not like the other members of their particular group.

In general terms then, the resource team and class teachers felt that many students had benefitted from the programme in the areas of skills acquisition, social skills and self esteem. Results of some objective measurements were inconclusive - a control group of children not attending the programme might have resulted in a more objective assessment.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude therefore, the programme was viewed as a worthwhile project, and has been continued into this school year with a number of modifications: the number of groups attending the programme has been decreased and therefore each has an increased time allocation. Greater efforts are being made to liaise with class teachers. As the programme is continually being reviewed, no doubt other changes will occur in the coming year. This article summarises the experiences of one school. No doubt other schools have alternative projects in operation and we naturally would welcome other suggestions and ideas.



## NOTES

1. The National Safety Council runs courses in water safety and lifesaving for adults and children at various locations around the country. A course specifically designed for Primary Teachers is organised each summer. Further details may be had from the National Safety Council, 4 Northbrook Road, Ranelagh, Dublin 6. Tel: 01-963422
2. An evening course in fretwork for Primary Teachers is available in Dublin at the Teachers' Centre, Drumcondra.
3. Patterns and fretwork accessories may be purchased from Hobbies Ltd., 20 Elvin Road, Dereham, Norfolk, NR19 2DW. The author also has a varied selection of patterns which he will share with any interested teachers or youth workers.

## REFERENCES

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