

Breaking Barriers: New Roles for Special Schools

Recent research in England has identified some of the new roles necessitated by the twin requirements of integration and the provision of high quality education for pupils with special needs.

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Special schools arose as a solution to an administrative problem. They provided a means of educating children that ordinary schools would not or could not take. There were other strands in their emerging history - humanitarian/religious motives, medical influences and pedagogical movements - but the administrative imperative has been a dominant factor.

Acknowledging that special schools are an administrative convenience as far as ordinary schools are concerned is not to devalue them or minimise in any way the signal contributions they have made, and are making. Without them many children and young people would not be educated. However, we live in times of great change, and the relationship of special schools to ordinary schools is a critical factor in determining the future of special schools - if they have a long-term future.

LINKS BETWEEN SPECIAL SCHOOLS AND ORDINARY SCHOOLS

Some pointers for the way ahead can be gleaned from a UK study into the actual links being built between special schools and ordinary schools. This was conducted at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) in 1985. While the findings are a little out of date, they point to a number of emerging trends and indicate likely future directions.

The study was conducted by means of a questionnaire sent to a large national sample of special schools, supplemented by interviews and observations in selected schools. The findings are summarised in Hegarty (1987) and reported in full in Jowett, Hegarty and Moses (1988).

The most striking finding to emerge from the survey was the scale on which links were taking place. As the table shows, almost three quarters of the special schools responding were involved in a link of some kind, while a further one-tenth were planning to set up links in the future. There is no reason to suppose that these special schools were atypical. It would appear then that a considerable majority of

special schools in England and Wales were engaged in a link of some kind with an ordinary school and, moreover, that this number was on the increase.

Special schools involved in links

	No.	%
Current link	197	73
Plans for a link	26	10
Previous link	5	2
No involvement in links	40	15
	<hr/> 268	<hr/> 100

What form did the links take? Typically, they were multi-faceted, involving both pupils and teachers, plus sometimes curriculum materials and other resources as well. They also varied a great deal, ranging from one-off arrangements for individual pupils to the whole-scale movement of entire classes.

Most pupil movement was from a special school to an ordinary school, though there was some in the reverse direction as well. An estimated 6% of special school pupils spent some time in ordinary schools. This was for relatively short periods of time in the majority of cases, although a small number were spending much of the week in an ordinary school. It was quite common for individual arrangements to be made for pupils, although twice as many pupils went out as members of a class group than went out on an individual basis.

Movement in the other direction, to a special school, was more restricted in scale. The number of pupils involved was generally small, as was the amount of time spent in the special school by a given pupil from the ordinary school. However, it is worth noting that almost half of the special schools were receiving one or more pupils from the ordinary school in this way. This was usually for the purpose of carrying out a specific short-term intervention that was best provided in the special school.

The movement of staff between schools was more evenly divided. About one third of special schools had staff (teachers and ancillaries) going out to ordinary schools on a weekly basis. The nature and duration of these visits varied greatly. A quarter of the teachers spent at least one full day a week out in the ordinary school. The main activities undertaken, in order of frequency, were:

- teaching mixed classes of mainstream and special school pupils
- advising mainstream colleagues
- working with pupils from the special school

Surprisingly, liaising with mainstream staff accounted for relatively little time.

Rather more than one third of the special schools sampled were receiving visits from staff of an ordinary school, though this amounted to weekly contact in no more than a quarter of cases. Many of the visits were for the purpose of capitalising on the concentration of resources and experience in the special school. Staff came to observe teaching techniques, study record keeping in individual learning programmes, and examine teacher materials and equipment. In a few cases they accompanied groups of pupils from an ordinary school to use the swimming pool or other facilities in a special school.

A NEW KIND OF SPECIAL SCHOOL

Do special schools have a future? Do the links between special schools and ordinary schools being developed in Britain point to a time when special schools will be redundant? The effect of many link programmes has been to transfer individual pupils from a special school to an ordinary school. In a few cases, the scale of such transfer has been so great that the special school has closed or been amalgamated.

Certainly, one - fairly straight forward - way of interpreting these developments is to see them as sounding the death knell for special schools. To the extent that link programmes help to build in ordinary schools appropriate academic environments for pupils with special educational needs and relevant expertise among staff, they are removing a major reason for the existence of special schools. If ordinary schools can educate pupils with special needs satisfactorily, why should they go to a special school in the first place?

However, there are at least three reasons why special schools will continue to be part of the landscape of special educational provision for some time to come. First, building up the necessary expertise *and* appropriate attitudes in ordinary school staff will not happen quickly. Many ordinary schools have sufficient difficulty with their existing clientele and it would be naive to suppose that all schools will want to gear themselves up for teaching pupils with special needs. Secondly, pupils with complex and severe difficulties make exceptional demands on school staff. Even where teachers are enthusiastic, providing an appropriate educational environment for such pupils can be difficult in the extreme. Thirdly, funding arrangements are likely to be a significant barrier. In many countries special schools and ordinary schools are financed in quite different ways. In theory, it might seem straight forward to transfer resources from one administrative pocket to another. In practice, the difficulties can be such as to inhibit the most dedicated moves toward integration. A particular problem here is how to provide the extra resources an individual needs in a mainstream setting without unduly singling him/her out.

Just as it would be naive to predict the demise of special schools, it would equally be unwise to expect them to remain unchanged. For a start, there are likely to be fewer special schools. Integration pressures, improved provision in ordinary schools and - in many countries - falling school rolls will reduce the number of special schools. This will alter the nature of the client group. As more pupils with

special needs attend ordinary schools, those remaining in special schools will be the ones with the greatest and most complex learning difficulties.

This in turn will push up unit costs since these pupils require more individual attention and probably more expensive resources. It will also necessitate better trained and more expert staff since these pupils pose the greatest teaching challenge.

Special schools may have to move away from the disability categories by which they have defined themselves. There is a growing awareness of the irrelevance of disability groupings for many teaching purposes. Where this is combined with falling rolls and a greater concentration of pupils with multiple handicapping conditions, special schools have to characterise themselves and develop their curricula in different ways. They might, for instance, operate on an area basis, catering for pupils with a wide range of learning needs within that area, or they could attempt to work to a new mapping of special educational need based on pupils' requirement of specialist teaching.

Other changes relate to the physical environment and equipment. School buildings are likely to be of a higher standard as old and unsuitable premises are taken out of service. Technology, especially computer based technology, will be much more in evidence. This will mean more sophisticated aids to communication and mobility but also, and more importantly, better use being made of information technology to promote pupil learning. It is refreshing to note that many of the most imaginative applications of information technology in schools are taking place in the special education sector as opposed to ordinary schools.

RESOURCE CENTRES

More substantial changes, affecting the structure of special schools are likely to follow from the range of the new functions entailed in supporting ordinary schools. This is the context where the link programmes described above fit in. Another aspect of this is the emergence of the special school as a resource centre. This can be for curriculum development, in-service training, the collection and evaluation of equipment and computer software, specialist assessment, and advice and consultation on all matters relating to the education of pupils with special needs.

These resource centre functions are important in improving the standard of educational provision regardless of where it is provided. They make it possible to capitalise on experience and establish a bank of information, resources and expertise. They are particularly relevant for ordinary schools who have only a few pupils with marked special needs on roll and do not have ready opportunity to build up the necessary knowledge and expertise themselves.

All of these developments point to a new kind of institution - part special school, part teachers' centre, part advisory service. The precise nature of the institutions that emerge will depend on the priority given to the different functions. This will vary from place to place and from time to time. It is not possible - or sensible - to lay down prescriptions, but special schools will have to change. If special school staff want to have some influence on these changes, it is imperative for them to be

aware of the possibilities and to plan actively to capitalise on the opportunities that present themselves.

REFERENCES

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