

Developing Learning Support Systems

The Warnock Report has had a major impact on special education throughout the U.K. The development of Learning Support Systems in Scotland, representing an important expansion of the traditional role of the Remedial Teacher, points to a significant future trend in special needs provision.

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Background

In Scotland, about the middle of the seventies and after the raising of the school leaving age, there was the dawning of a real interest in the education of pupils with learning difficulties. Related as it was to the problems created by the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA), the initial interest centred on the secondary school. Obviously what happened to pupils at secondary level could not be detached from their earlier experiences in the primary school, and the developments which followed affected both primary and secondary schools.

Teachers, many of whom had come through the turbulent sixties and committed to the ideal of comprehensive education were becoming uneasy and more conscious of the contradictions between the claims that were being made about the system and the realities of their day to day practice in schools.

The claim which was increasingly under fire was that the impetus to provide 'remedial' education had been humanitarian and of course there was truth in that. The reality, however, was, as Sally Tomlinson said, that in one sense it was "nothing other than a 'safety valve' for the mainstream, allowing it to function unimpeded by these troublesome deviants" (1984). The claim was that comprehensive schools were for all; the reality was that more and more pupils were being disconnected from ordinary classes and separated out and segregated either in separate classes or through the pervasive system of withdrawal. Questions were being asked:

The Questions

Was it appropriate or helpful to view learning difficulties from a pupil deficit perspective, i.e. to see the pupil as the 'problem', the response as a 'remedy'?

Was it acceptable, within the comprehensive system, that the remedial teacher should have the sole responsibility for the increasingly large number of pupils withdrawn from the mainstream on account of learning difficulties?

Was it acceptable, within the comprehensive system, to offer to large number of pupils a restricted curriculum largely divorced from the mainstream programme?

How could a system of segregation and withdrawal be justified, when, in effect, these same procedures made any return to the mainstream problematic?

Was there any mechanism by which class and subject teachers could get advice, support and help, to help them meet the range of needs found in a mixed ability class?

The Onset of Change

By 1980, almost every Education Authority in Scotland had reviewed their 'remedial provision' for 'slow learners', as they were then termed. Typical of those was a report which underlined "the need to examine current practices, provisions, facilities and resources and to invite observation and comments". Education Authorities determined "to assess the effectiveness of remedial education in primary and secondary school, and provide further guidance, if necessary, to both headteachers and teachers". These reports make interesting reading, almost providing a case study in change!

Another irreplaceable strand in the process which led to changes within the comprehensive system came from the work of the Consultative Committee on the Curriculum in Scotland which sponsored an unprecedented series of major reports on curriculum and assessment during the same period. These included the Munn Report *Curriculum in S3 and S4*, the Dunning Report *Assessment for All* and the Pack Report *Truancy and Indiscipline*. In addition there was a report on Religious Education, the Young Report on Drama, the Cameron Report on Music and a series of other papers on Health Education, Social Studies and so on. In each of these reports reference was made to the place of pupils with learning difficulties and the need to view them as an integral part of the school community.

These reports all showed a growing awareness of the need to broaden the curriculum and make it accessible to a wide range of pupils.

The Cameron Report, for example, criticised a music curriculum apparently designed for the type of pupil who might go on to a degree of excellence as a performer but which had little to offer to the generality of pupils, who, nevertheless spent a great deal of their own time and energy listening to and making music. Again, the Pack Report laid much of the responsibility for truancy and indiscipline on the nature of the education provided for many pupils and saw the curriculum as a vital element in dealing with the pupils under discussion.

There was of course also the increasing unease that the segregation of pupils with learning difficulties into remedial streams and classes had not been just. Comprehensive education implied "common courses and mixed ability teaching" and a concern that "every child must have the opportunity to come into contact with the breadth of human knowledge". The situation pre-1978 was still one of "countervailing values" and "dilemmas of action" as Eysenck had pointed out. Many schools were finding it difficult to provide an appropriate and differentiated education. It was clear that the rhetorical commitment to comprehensive education in Scotland had not been translated into action. There was little evidence that the school system conceived on the basis of equality of opportunity and individual need, could take account of individual or familial aspiration. In retrospect, this required a new pedagogy aimed to recognise and value individual difference and to provide an appropriate curriculum for each pupil as opposed to a general education for all.

Warnock and the Progress Report

Two important reports, published in 1978, expressed a need for a broader definition of pupils who experience learning difficulties. The Warnock Report (UK) had estimated that one child in five was likely to have special educational needs and would therefore require special educational provision at some point in his/her school career. Later the

same year a Progress Report was published by HM Inspectors of Schools (Scotland) *The Education of Pupils with Learning Difficulties in Primary and Secondary Schools in Scotland*. Based on a two year survey of schools the Progress Report emphasised that the notion of learning difficulties embraced a greater number of pupils than normally had been thought of as requiring 'remedial help' in fact, possibly up to 50% of the total school population. The report put forward a wider definition of 'remedial' education and inter alia identified the following concerns.

Firstly the survey had revealed a range and diversity of learning difficulty among pupils which went well beyond that failure to master the basic skills of reading and computation. It further suggested that all pupils can experience learning difficulties, but highlighted what has become a fundamental issue in the policies and trainings subsequently developed. "Because the range of learning difficulties is so wide and their nature so complex, it is too much to ask that they be tackled by the provision of remedial teachers alone". (Progress Report 4.3) The response to this wider definition had to be planned on a whole school basis, that is it had to involve management, class and subject teachers as well as learning support staff as the former 'remedial' teachers began to be known as.

Focus on the Curriculum

The report also claimed that one of the main sources of learning difficulty was the curriculum and the ways in which it had been presented. It stated that the curriculum was at the same time the main cause and potential cure of many learning difficulties, and that the main agents for change had to be the teachers who dealt with this. It was further suggested that any response to learning difficulties should be planned on a whole school basis and that the responsibility for dealing with these difficulties had to lie with all the teachers in the school, collectively and individually.

It should be understood, that traditionally headteachers and other promoted staff in Scottish schools had not laid any great emphasis on their responsibility or on the responsibilities of class and subject teachers in relation to pupils with learning difficulties or in fact of fitting the work of the 'remedial' teachers into a policy involving all members of staff. Scottish schools were strongly academic, even although democratic in their approach to able working class pupils.

From Remedial Education to Learning Support

Although the Progress Report was one of the shortest reports produced in recent years, its influence in Scotland has been both radical and profound. The education of pupils with learning difficulties particularly in ordinary schools could no longer be regarded as simply additional, different or "special", but had to be viewed as a central concern of all teachers, schools, regional authorities and the colleges of education responsible for training. The emphasis on the need for a whole school policy called for changes in the organisation and management in schools and for the clarification and definition of a new set of roles and responsibilities for management and teachers. Also a new role had to be found for the specialist remedial teachers which was unique and fitted into this whole school policy. Their role had to be multi-purpose.

Role Of Learning Support Teacher

- Act as a consultant to staff and members of the school management team;
- In co-operation with class and subject teachers offer tutorial and supportive help in their normal classes to pupils with learning difficulties in any areas of the curriculum;
- Provide personal tuition and support for pupils with severe learning difficulties in the process of communication and computation;
- Provide, arrange for or contribute to special services within the school.*

In addition it was clear that initiating and contributing to staff development was a natural concomitant of these roles in particular where the aim was to develop a whole school policy.

Following an unprecedented programme of dissemination involving regional authorities, colleges and schools, the recommendations of the Progress Report were generally agreed, with staff development and in-service training seen as the keys to effective implementation.

Whole School Policy Implications

Before whole school policies could operate, however, many issues had to be resolved. The notions of consultancy and co-operative teaching meant a move away from the traditional pattern of Scottish teaching with its emphasis on the work of the individual teacher. There was a need to sort out the respective roles of the new learning support staff and those of the regular class and subject teachers. Decisions had to be made about the terms of co-operation and who would have the ultimate responsibility for both curriculum and methodology within schools and classes. There was concern to ensure that teachers would not see the work of the learning support staff as an intrusion or use the presence of the "expert" as a way of shelving their responsibilities to this wider group of children with learning difficulties. Clearly the new policies called for a re-definition of the respective roles and responsibilities of learning support and class teachers which would be both co-operative and complementary. They also recognised that class and subject teachers would require a new system of support if they were to bring about and sustain kind of fundamental change that would enable them to meet the new demands.

The work of learning support teachers in Scotland has moved from the periphery to a central position where they are closely involved in managing the process of effective teaching and learning across the curriculum. They are consequently involved in a wide range of activities in all subject areas. This includes for example working individually with class and subject teachers in order to alert them to the range of factors which affect pupil performance and the range of strategies and resources which can be used to alleviate difficulties. This may involve giving advice to individual teachers and departments on content, methodology, resources, organisation and the place and purpose of language in education. They will also be expected to provide diagnostic assessment and individualised programmes.

Roles and Responsibilities

Clearly successful learning support teaching as defined above involves acquiring a new set of knowledge and skills including:-

New Skills Needed

- understanding the school as a whole, its context, organisation and management;
- negotiating access and entry to, and acceptance in the classes of subject teachers;
- understanding the respective roles and responsibilities involved;
- engaging in a dialogue which ensures clarity and effective functioning in a co-operative situation;
- working to develop with other colleagues the strategies which underpin good co-operative teaching i.e. clarifying roles and areas of responsibility and establishing mutual acceptance, trust and credibility etc;
- developing effective skills in communication;
- recognising the need to engage in joint analysis and assessment of need, problem identification, description, discussion, experimentation and planned intervention and evaluation;
- reflecting on the whole process, evaluating it, questioning assumptions, being aware of areas of conflict and misunderstanding, restructuring in order to be able to embody new concepts in future action.

These learning support teachers are now involved in a whole new way of working. They are all involved in working more with their adult colleagues and less directly with children. This has called for the development of a different sort of professional relationship involving joint planning and delivery of the curriculum. They need the interpersonal skills necessary to deal with colleagues with different levels of skill, commitment and experience. This includes a range of very specific skills in the planning and development of an appropriate curriculum, introducing differentiated material, advising on different approaches to teaching and learning, class management and assessment.

For these roles to be discharged effectively, of course, the contribution of class and subject teachers has also been redefined to include a wider range of responsibility than that envisaged before the adoption of the new policies. This has in fact led to an awareness and understanding leading to an acceptance that the regular teachers, with the help of the learning support staff, should be able to recognise the bulk of learning difficulties themselves, provide appropriate programmes to match the range of abilities found in a normal class and only remit the very small percentage of pupils whose difficulties are such that is well nigh impossible to deal with them within the class. It is interesting to note that these new approaches have extended the professional roles and

responsibilities of class and subject teachers well beyond that which was seen as the norm in the days of withdrawal and segregation into 'remedial classes'. These teachers, as always identify pupils with basic difficulties in language and computation but now, as part and parcel of their day to day work will attempt a pedagogy designed to ensure that all pupils have opportunities to learn. They are more aware of the need to build on students' strengths, interests, experience and previous knowledge. and will in addition see the importance of using continuous assessment as part of the teaching learning process.

Supporting Learning Support

In Scotland the development of these policies has called for an extensive programme of in-service training and staff development which up to the present has on the whole been well supported at a national and regional level. Diplomas in Professional Studies in Education e.g. have been developed and are on offer at all colleges of education in Scotland apart from one smaller college mainly involved in regular primary education. Candidates for these courses are recruited from staff who meet rigorous criteria which include successful teaching in mainstream, understanding and experience of the mainstream curriculum and a demonstrated ability to work well in a team situation.

The courses as offered bear little resemblance to the earlier 'remedial' training. They all include as main strands advanced study of curriculum assessment, school management and organisation, change agent skills and the communication and interpersonal skills needed for consultancy and co-operative teaching.

Most regions and colleges have also been involved in a wide range of short courses and school-based staff development now on a structured and contractual basis. More, however needs to be done particularly with the regular teachers, if the work begun is going to continue and expand.

Evaluating Progress

Any assessment or evaluation of the work in progress must recognise the complexities of the task in hand. The learning support teachers are now involved with the whole range of pupils each with his/her own school 'career' and experience of success or failure. They are engaged with colleagues each of whom has a history, personal and professional. They are working individually and with groups and whole classes within a school context shaped by social and political forces, its personnel, structure and management style. For an evaluation to be effective and valid, it has to take place over time and use a methodology responsive to the need to map out the personalities, contexts, interactions and interdependencies involved. This has still to be done.

A recent American study in 1987 (Warren, M.J., University of Louisville) although, quite limited in its extent offers inter alia the following comments.

The learning support teachers and administrators interviewed stated that while the collaborative and consultative relationships in the various schools are at different stages of development, the learning support teachers are succeeding in developing a climate in which regular teachers are becoming more open to working collaboratively with others in order to increase access to the mainstream curriculum.

Teachers and administrators interviewed perceived the learning support service as an effective means of meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties and their

teachers. Class and subject teachers do not appear to complain about learning support teachers not having an assigned number of students each period. Interestingly, they do complain about learning support teachers not having enough time to consult them. Administrators stated that the learning support teachers have helped regular teachers modify instruction to meet the special educational needs of a wide range of pupils and develop new skills that can be applied without the actual presence of the learning support teacher. Class and subject teachers stated that the learning support teachers have helped them meet problems in the classroom so that pupils did not have to be referred out of class or school for support and help.

Into the Future

The general impression in 1989 is of a process that is beginning to change schools and classrooms in Scotland for the better, in terms of the educational well being of pupils with learning difficulties, recognising that this may in fact extend to all pupils for some of the time. Its continued success will, however, depend on a continued commitment at a national and regional level in terms of maintaining the level of resources needed for specialised training and general staff development. At school level it calls for a genuinely co-operative and collaborative way of working. This has implications for the organisation and management of the school, its philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy.

The policies and practice of the last ten years have called for extended professionalism on the part of class, subject and learning support teachers, learning each to shape up their unique contributions to the process of working together to meet the needs of all the pupils who come into our schools. It will be interesting to see how these policies will survive in a situation where the U.K. government seems to be motivated by a different kind of philosophy - one which is about value for money and a hard-nosed attitude to curriculum and assessment. Time will tell!

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