

## Children with Special Needs in the Primary School - a European Perspective

The European dimension in education is becoming increasingly significant as we approach 1992. The article summarises the results of an EC project concerning children with special needs at primary level in European countries.

---

**PATRICK LAVIN** is a District Inspector of Schools in the Department of Education. He has responsibility for Special Education in Counties Mayo, Sligo and parts of County Donegal.

---

Project No. 8 of the Council for Cultural Development of the Council of Europe, *Innovation in Primary Education* (1988), examined the pressures influencing Primary Education, offered a model of the modern Primary School centred on individualised teaching and on respect for the autonomy of the pupil, offered a further model of the process of innovation by which schools may adapt to modern conditions and requirements and finally drew conclusions and made recommendations.

Representing about six years' work and managed by a Project Group of which I had the privilege of being a member since early 1987, it enlisted the help of experts in education, used research findings, examined case studies in innovation, established a network of twelve contact schools to convert theory into practice and held seminars, conferences and meetings.

Its special education elements, outlined here, derive in the main from Italy which embarked on a policy of integration in 1977, from the Italian Contact School, Civitavecchia (Doeland et al, 1985 ; Koplms, 1988), and from a Conference on *Children with Special Needs in the Primary School* (Favret, 1986) held in Rome in 1985.

The Project defines Primary Education as the education of children between the ages of six and twelve years (Baert et al., 1988). Education prior to the age of six is, by implication, pre-school education, while that after the age of twelve is, more obviously, secondary education.

A previous Project, No. 7 on Migrants (Porches et al, 1986) had raised awareness of groups other than Migrants whose special needs placed them in a state of educational abnormality in the primary school. These included the gifted, the handicapped, the disadvantaged and those from different cultures such as gypsies, nomads, and river-craft children: in short, the very able, the very weak and the marginalised.

### **Integration**

Project No. 8 recommends the integration of this group of children in the ordinary primary school which, in a three-fold unity of time, place and action, caters for an entire generation, enabling all children to grow in fuller knowledge of self and of the other and promoting such ethical virtues as tolerance and mutual respect (Baert et al, 1988, p.31).

It recognises a general European trend towards educational integration (Favret, 1986, p. 15), not as an end in itself but as a means of achieving social integration, and urges that primary education be so organised as to meet the needs of all (except in extreme cases) in the ordinary rather than in the special school.

The project notes that in Italy, during the transition to integration, attitudinal problems were encountered in society, in families and among teachers, the experience of special schools was sometimes lost and remedial teachers, newly arrived in ordinary schools, initially lacked tradition, adequate training and an adequate model of operation. Nevertheless, the right of special children to integrated education is now established: classes are open to all; additional help to meet the needs of individual schools is provided in a variety of ways; special training arrangements have been made to secure the higher level of skill now required of all teachers and progress, albeit uneven, has been made in the development of relationships between schools and local authorities.

### **The Primary School**

According to the Project, the Primary School should aim to promote "success for all" (Favret, 1986 p.10) by enabling each child to master a maximum number of skills with which to play as full a part as possible in social life in all its aspects.

It lays the foundation for all the forms of communication needed for social life, recognises that "all children are special" (Ibid, p.15), that each child "grows through walking and doing as well as through speaking and learning" (Ibid, p.3), that balanced growth can only mean "growth of the child in all its aspects" and that there is but "one efficient approach" to education, that is "to individualise the teaching process.....for everyone" (Ibid, p.3)

The Primary School sees itself as an educational community attempting to break down barriers at all levels by providing continuity in counselling and support, by seeking flexibility in the deployment of teaching staff and by systematically linking up and conferring real responsibility on all partners: teachers, health professionals, care and ancillary staff, parents, local authorities and the children themselves.

It develops its own strategies for flexibility and becomes able to assess itself, its pupils' needs, its human and pastoral capabilities, its actual and potential relationship with the environment and its available resources with a view to engaging in appropriate innovation.

It emphasises active individualisation of the learning process, takes account of the different speeds of learning of each pupil, makes the curriculum more functional, the better to socialise the child and help him/her towards responsibility and independence, and promotes teamwork and communication.

It prepares for each child an individual programme with educational, welfare and therapeutic components, the implementation of which will require teamwork from all concerned.

### **Teachers**

The Project recognises that more complex teaching skills are required where integration is practised and that the remedial teacher is most successful where the school as a whole is committed to integration and where specialists and local health institutions cooperate, not just with the remedial teacher, but with the school. No teacher can act in isolation any more: success requires co-operation, expansion of teaching skills and inclusion in teacher training programmes of the fruits of research and experience.

### **Teacher Training**

The Project suggests multidisciplinary training that will promote teamwork and educational continuity, develop optional skills and include a component on children with special needs. Initial training, of three years' duration and of university standard, will be both theoretical/philosophical and practical, be subject based with modules on methodology and education, include study of the interaction between education and the environment, and promote self-confidence, positive action and resourcefulness.

Inservice training, combining theory and practice, will be staff-oriented and aim to equip teachers to take responsibility in specific areas and to develop a type of school in which the potential of all children is enhanced.

All training will be monitored to ensure that it increases the skill of all teachers, enhances the specialist skill of some and promotes co-operation between remedial and class teachers.

### **Resources**

Financial resources, the Project envisages, will be efficiently managed and used, educational resources generated and conserved, information exchanged from school to school and between schools and nearby resource centres while more distant resource centres will assist those with major or rare handicaps and those in special social groups.

### **Special Schools**

Where the seriously disabled cannot be integrated into ordinary schools, they will be enrolled in special schools avoiding as far as possible the transfer of children out of the home area. Attendance at special schools, based on each child's history and actual need, will alternate with integration as appropriate in the normal school, a concept called "flexible" integration (Ibid, p.20). Special schools will also develop programmes for migrants and cultural minorities and explore the potential of new technology.

### **Parents and the Community**

The school is seen as being responsible to parents for the educative process. Parents will have a right to enrol their child in the nearest school and to expect that school to meet his/her individual needs. Where the child must be placed in a special school, parents will have a right to ongoing review that will enable the child to return to the ordinary school at the earliest opportunity.

Parents may assist the school to refine educational processes, diagnose situations, check work hypotheses and evaluate the adequacy of strategies and methods. Where appropriate, parents of a relevant culture may be involved in the running of a school.

Parent/Teacher associations will enhance co-operation, help the exchange of information and advice, and monitor children's development. The choice of school is seen as the parent's responsibility, the choice of teaching practices as the responsibility of the school.

The school that seeks to reach its full potential will establish essential liaison with the community and systematically link up all available human and technical resources: specialists, advisers, research bodies, documentation services, and centres for the production of teaching materials and observation/evaluation instruments.

Links with pre-school, with the general school environment and with local cultural and social organisations will compensate for language deficiency, perceived as a more serious handicap than socio-occupational status, and may be funded by decentralising edu-

cational resources. Sweden offers a model in which specially trained teachers, in co-operation with remedial teachers and social workers, work in recreational centres, clubs and associations (Ibid, p.16).

### **Evaluation**

Since integration is a major innovation which requires that each participant be responsible for his/her actions, know what he/she is doing and know the extent of his/her progress towards objectives, the Project considers it essential not only that accurate evaluative instruments be available but that evaluation procedures be established early on and be subject to continuous review.

### **New Information Technology**

The Project believes that the use of new information technology will widen the child's scope for action and cause a questioning of our assumptions about educational abilities and disabilities; communication aids may enable non-articulating children to develop their language and capacity for education; data-processing aids may restore to children an operational (logical) capacity that was thought beyond them, stimulate their visual, spatial, linguistic and cognitive development and ultimately alter their self-image; aids to independence in daily life may increasingly enable those with motor handicaps to cope with their environment and control it. Directly or indirectly, the Project believes, new information technology will enhance the social role of handicapped people and hasten the day when they will lead more normal lives.

### **Inventories**

The Project suggests that National Authorities, in co-operation with the Council of Europe, provide inventories outlining the quality and quantity of inservice training provided, the state of development of teamwork in schools, the availability and scale of resource centres, the provision for the professional development of head teachers and inspectors, the availability and quality of evaluative instruments, the provision in schools for minority cultures and for intercultural education and the development and use of new information technology, particularly in relation to the handicapped.

### **Conclusion**

The Project, in its notion of special education, includes the gifted and the marginalised as well as the handicapped.

It recommends that, as far as possible, these special children be integrated into the normal primary school to whose staffs remedial or specialist teachers might be appointed as appropriate.

It makes clear that responsibility for the success of integration rests not on the remedial teacher alone but on the commitment of the entire school staff, on its expertise, its capacity for teamwork and its ability to co-ordinate its effort with that of outside agencies, including parents and health professionals.

It expresses a view on the role of parents, special agencies and special schools, on the training of teachers and on the use of information technology and suggests the need for a broad curriculum, individualised teaching and appropriate evaluation.

Overall, the Project provides a European perspective on the education of children with special needs.

**References**

- Baert, G., Galton, M., Honeth, P. and Thurler, M. (1988) *Innovation in Primary Education - The Final Report*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Doeland, T. and Kompels, D. (1985). *Report on a visit to the Italian Contact School*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Favret, Jean-Marc. (1986). *Children with Special Needs in the Primary School*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Kompels, Dook. (1988). *School Improvement from Within - The Contact School Plan*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Porcher, L. and Perottie, A. (1986). *The Education and Cultural Development of Migrants*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.