

## Involving Siblings In The Special School Curriculum

The siblings of pupils with special educational needs are a valuable and frequently untapped resource. At St. Vincent's Special School in Dublin for pupils with a moderate mental handicap, the teachers have begun a project to involve brothers and sisters actively in the curriculum.

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The increase in the number of services for pupils with special educational needs throughout the country has resulted in most pupils with a mental handicap continuing to live at home. This has given many special schools the opportunity of developing a partnership between home and school in the delivery of educational services.

Many schools are now actively involving parents in planning and operating the curriculum. This is achieved through a process which has become known as Individual Educational Plans (I.E.P.). Teachers, parents and the school team meet on a regular, often six monthly basis to plan a clear set of objectives for each pupil. These objectives are then worked on jointly by all concerned and progress is reviewed at the next I.E.P. meeting. For example; if a pupil is learning to handle small amounts of money up to 10p in class, then the plan might include the parents ensuring that the child will be given the opportunity of buying small items from the local shop a few times each week. In this way the curriculum, which is pursued in the school, is also actively reinforced at home.

Too frequently, however, when we talk about partnership and family involvement, we really mean involving just the parents. Brothers and sisters who have a sibling with a mental handicap are rarely actively involved in the educational plan. Yet, as Weinrott (1974) noted, siblings are a naturally present resource within the home and they often spend a great deal of their time playing with or in some cases taking care of their brother or sister with a mental handicap. Not alone do siblings spend a lot of their time with their brother or sister who has a mental handicap, but they also have the potential to exert considerable influence on their behaviour and functional adjustment. Indeed, in some families Weinrott (1974) suggested that siblings may have more time to interact with their brother or sister and as a result may be more effective when offering assistance. The literature supports the notion that siblings can become effective instructional agents at home (Schreibman, O'Neill & Koegel, 1983; Swenson-Pierce, Kohl & Egel, 1987). Furthermore, these authors have suggested that there are advantages for all the family members.

### **St. Vincent's Special School Project:**

At St. Vincent's Special School a number of the staff were keen that brothers and sisters would become actively involved in the partnership and educational programme between school and home. The school principal discussed the idea with the pupils' parents at a parent meeting. There was a lot of enthusiasm expressed by the parents for the project. As it was a new venture for the school, it was agreed that we should proceed cautiously and start the project off in a small way. Before the 1988 Summer holidays, the siblings of the pupils in two classes were invited to visit the school for an afternoon. The pupils in the two classes ranged in age from around 8 to 10 years and 9 to 11 years. A total of 36 siblings and 10 parents attended. This meant that about 90% of the pupils with a mental handicap who had a sibling were represented at the meetings. The siblings ranged in age from around 4 to 23 years, with the average being 13 years.

During each of the visits the principal, class teacher and school psychologist provided some background information on the philosophy and principles underlying the approach to education at St. Vincent's School. It was explained in simple terms that the school aimed to enlarge each pupil's knowledge, experience and imaginative understanding so as to enhance their awareness of moral values and capacity for enjoyment. By doing this, we hoped that each pupil would, when they completed their formal education, become an active participant in society and a responsible contributor to it, capable of achieving as much independence as possible. The school curriculum is arranged so as to allow for each child's individuality.

Special emphasis is placed on social training, language development and physical education. After this semi-formal introductory talk siblings were given an opportunity to look around the classroom and try out the different educational materials which were available. The teacher explained the rationale behind the use of the different types of educational materials and how they facilitate pupils in learning various concepts and subjects.

From the questions many of the siblings asked, it was clear that they were surprised to learn that the activities pursued in the school had a very clear purpose and that it was not all just fun and games. In particular, the older siblings showed an interest in the development of learning readiness skills and how matching and sorting tasks were directly related to the development of functional skills, such as the acquisition of a social sight vocabulary, the use of money, and pedestrian lights. Having grasped the school's aims and how the teachers approached different aspects of the curriculum, the siblings showed a good deal of enthusiasm as to how they might help their brother or sister become more independent at home. The siblings appeared to readily accept the considerable importance of allowing their brother or sister with a mental handicap to have opportunities to do as much as they could for themselves, of including him/her in activities which they themselves were involved in and the value of encouragement and praise. Each of the siblings was asked to try and think of at least one area where they could help their brother or sister and that at a follow up meeting they would have an opportunity to discuss this in

more detail. After the talk and classroom visit, the siblings were given an opportunity to see around the other facilities in St. Vincent's Centre. In the gym most of the brothers and sisters had a go on the large inflated bouncing castle and the ball pool - a large inflated plastic pool filled with tens of thousands of plastic balls. After this there was a visit to the swimming pool before coming back to the classroom for tea, orange and biscuits where they met their brother or sister who was attending the school, before going home.

The overall reaction of the siblings to the initial meetings appeared to be positive. The younger siblings seemed to particularly enjoy playing with the different pieces of equipment, while the older brothers and sisters were more interested in chatting to the school staff. The semi-formal group meetings were, however, perhaps, too large to encourage any real discussion and it appeared that the siblings preferred to talk to the school staff at an individual level. The pupils attending the school seemed to be very glad that their brothers and sisters had come to visit St. Vincent's and enjoyed showing them the work they were doing.

#### **Follow Up Reactions:**

It was possible to organise one follow up meeting before the Summer break. The attendance was good and all but one of the pupils whose siblings attended the initial meeting came to the follow up day. At this meeting a good deal of time was spent on letting the siblings know about the progress their brother or sister had made in the interim period and also on discussing the ideas the siblings had on how they might help him/her at home. Indeed, many had put their ideas into practice and this was obvious from the comments they made. We tried to keep an account of these comments and what follows is a brief sample of what some of the brothers and sisters said.

"I now find that I'm letting him do more for himself than I used"

"I now try to include him in more games and during the week he came out and played football with me"

"Both me and my sister take turns now in helping her with her reading at night"

"At home I spend more time listening and talking to Sarah when we are having our dinner, and I notice that she likes to talk about what she has been doing all day and the programme she sees on television"

"I used to think John was just bold but now I see that he is quite good at doing some things"

"I never realised before how much effort he puts into things and how hard he works in school"

#### **Conclusion:**

The Project at St. Vincent's is still in its initial stages; however, it seems clear that many siblings of pupils with special needs welcome the opportunity to become actively involved in helping their brother or sister with a mental handicap. The parents also seemed to be enthusiastic about having their non-handicapped children actively involved in a pro-

gramme aimed at providing help and support to their child who has a mental handicap. We believe that all members of the family have something to gain and to contribute by being involved in such a project and hopefully it will prove to be very beneficial for the child with special educational needs. The large difference in the ages of the siblings who attended the meetings posed some problems. In general, the siblings under the age of twelve seemed to enjoy playing with the different pieces of equipment and especially participating in activities, while the siblings over twelve seemed to prefer chatting individually with staff and finding out how they might help their brother or sister. As the project continues we would like to establish separate groups for siblings who are over twelve and those who are under twelve. Furthermore, having a brother or sister with a mental handicap living at home can provoke various emotional reactions and this was especially noticeable in children in the older age group. We believe that it would be important to provide these siblings with an opportunity to meet one another so as to share their feelings and concerns. Finally, the project was considered successful by all those involved and we are hoping to extend it to include other classes.

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