

The Principal and the Special Class

Whether the special class becomes a dumping ground for slow learners, disruptive and emotionally disturbed children and poor attenders or a bridge towards integration and understanding will depend largely on the attitude of the school principal.

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My experience, both as class teacher and as principal, has been in schools where special classes were already well established and accepted as an integral part of the school life. It is out of this background that I share some thoughts with you on the role of the principal vis-a-vis the special class. The fact that, as a sister of Mercy, I am influenced by Catherine McAuley's dedication to training people, especially those with special needs, to cope with life, also has a bearing on what I have to say.

I feel that the special class in the ordinary school plays a major role in helping such people. It is my belief that the success or otherwise of the special class in servicing children with special needs depends, to a large extent, on the principal's attitude towards and keen interest in this particular group of children.

Principal as Facilitator.

I see the principal's role in relation to the special class as that of a facilitator, one whose main contribution to the children in this class is made through working with:

- parents
- teachers of mainstream classes
- special class teachers
- the children themselves

The Principal and Parents of Children in Special Classes

The way in which I relate to and deal with parents is, I feel, of vital importance to the development of the special class child. I see it as extremely important that I have some understanding of and am sensitive to the emotional and psychological trauma of parents who are trying to face and accept the fact that their child is handicapped. Many parents who agree to having their child placed in a special class live in hope that, somehow, someday, the miracle will happen, that their child will be "cured", will become "normal". I feel that it is essential for me, as principal, to spend time, a lot of time, helping parents to realise:

- that their child's worth rests in being just that, a person, a child of the universe
- that they, as parents and we, as teachers, must help the child to cope with life as he/she

finds it

- that we must help the child to develop the potential that is his/hers
- that education is about drawing out and developing that potential and is not limited to learning the basic skills of reading and writing or the three Rs as they are more commonly called
- that education includes helping the child to socialise and behave in a manner appropriate to his/her age.

Progress with children in the special class can be greatly hampered, I feel, by the unreal expectations of some parents. It is important for the principal, therefore, to encourage parents:

- to discover ways of making appropriate demands on the child with special needs
- to meet with other parents of children with special needs
- to attend meetings and seminars on special education.

Our own parents were helped enormously by the course organised by the Psychological Society of Ireland. We had circularised them about the course and had supplied them with application forms. The teachers of the special classes and I attended the course with the parents. There was very valuable interaction at the course between parents and teachers and between parents and parents. One parent later observed that she felt as if it was her child who was being discussed and that she had learned a lot about her child, her behaviour, why she does what she does etc. through attending the course.

The Principal and the Teachers of Ordinary Classes

It is the role of the principal to ensure that the teachers of ordinary classes in the school:

- realise the importance of the special class within that school
- are really informed on the nature of the special class
- understand that it is not a dumping ground for slow learners, disruptive children, poor attenders or emotionally disturbed children but rather a place for children with a mild mental handicap who, through limited intellectual ability are incapable of benefitting adequately from the normal school programme.

It is the principal too, who will see to it that the teachers of the ordinary classes realise the need which the special class teacher has for their moral support and companionship without which he/she can feel very isolated. I have referred to the principal as a facilitator. I also see him/her as a bridge-builder, as one who helps the staff to see the importance of and to work towards the integration of the special class children with the other children in the school in as many areas as possible of the curriculum. The areas of sport, recreation, drama and religious education are areas which lend themselves to such integration. It is my experience that this level of integration is not only possible but also very desirable. It ensures that the teachers generally know the children in the special classes by name, that they visit the special class rooms, that they are seen to appreciate the work of the children in the special class.

It has been our policy to encourage the children in the special class to display their work (especially their efforts in the cookery class) for the other classes where these efforts are always admired and sometimes envied.

The Principal and the Teachers of Special Classes

Perhaps the most important role of the principal in relation to special class teachers is one of:

- constant moral support
- interest in their work
- encouragement and listening to the problems they may have in relation to their most demanding task
- ensuring that they have more than adequate accommodation in a well-placed, well-lit classroom, situated in the heart of things, thus emphasising the fact that the children in the special class are not lesser beings because they are less endowed intellectually than their colleagues in the ordinary classes.

The Principal and the Children in the Special Class

I believe that my most important role in relation to the children themselves is that of being for them someone who really accepts them totally, who respects their dignity, who is present to them in a loving, caring way, someone who knows them by name, who facilitates their integration with other children, who encourages them, who challenges them to use the ability which they do, in fact, have.

The principal is one person, I feel, who needs to visit the special class every day. It is the principal, too, who sees to it that the children in the special class have responsibilities within the school.

In our school it is the children in the special classes who are responsible for the opening and closing of the cloakrooms, who check that the school lunches have been delivered to the school, who bring various notices from class to class. Perhaps my understanding of the principal's role in relation to the children in the special class and of how the children see him/her is best summed up by the following extract, for which I thank the author (unknown!)

BEATITUDES FOR FRIENDS OF SPECIAL PEOPLE

- Blessed are you who take the time to listen to difficult speech, for you help me to know that if I persevere I can be understood.
- Blessed are you who never bid me to 'hurry up' and take my tasks from me and do them for me, for often I need time rather than help.
- Blessed are you who stand beside me as I enter new and untried ventures, for my failures will be outweighed by the times I surprise myself and you.
- Blessed are you who asked for my help, for my greatest need is to be needed.
- Blessed are you who understand that it is difficult for me to put my thoughts into words.
- Blessed are you who, with a smile, encourage me to try once more.
- Blessed are you who never remind me that today I asked the same question two times.
- Blessed are you who respect me and love me as I am, just as I am, and not like you wish I were.