

BASC: The Bandon Integration Scheme

Integrating children with a moderate degree of mental handicap is a relatively unique situation in Ireland today. Determined planning and sustained commitment were fundamental ingredients in this success story.

SIOBHÁN ALLEN is a teacher in the Presentation Convent N.S., Bandon, Co Cork.

Bandon Area Special Classes (B.A.S.C.) provide an integrated special education for children with a moderate degree of mental handicap residing within a 20 mile radius of Bandon in West Cork. Children falling into this category generally have an I.Q. ranging from 35-55. They may have difficulty in communicating verbally and may have poor motor control. Many such children have a limited awareness of their environment and thus have poor social and adaptive skills. Some children may also have behavioural and/or emotional problems and their intellectual immaturity may be further complicated by other physical, sensory or neurological disorders.

Up to February 1985, the children in Bandon and West Cork were catered for and educated in Cork city in special schools such as Cork Polio and Lota. This meant that the children were either residential or had to travel long distances to school. The children from Bandon and its surrounds were not living in their own community and thus became strangers to their peers and neighbours.

Aware of the great need of some form of special education, school principals in the Bandon region came together in February 1984 with the aim of providing a suitable alternative locally. They were concerned when children that they had asked to be assessed were subsequently sent to Cork. They were fully aware of the ill effects this had on their families.

An important figure invited to this meeting was St Maire McElligot, a teacher in the local Presentation Convent in Bandon, who had previously been a principal teacher in Cork Polio and whose knowledge and experience proved invaluable at these early critical stages. She suggested contacting the local Department inspector for special education - Mr P McCann and Mr John Bermingham, the chief executive of Cork Polio, to get their views.

The inspector supported the idea and John Bermingham, who provided valuable advice, promised every assistance and the use of the organisation's services.

A list of addresses of children who would qualify for the class was obtained and their parents were circularised to discover if they were interested in a day-school for their children. Contact was made with Mr Donal Creed, the then Junior Minister for Education and responsible for special education. He supported the idea and advised the committee to apply to the Department for sanction. There were seven children involved at this stage. The pupil teacher ratio for such children is 12:1, but the Department said it would sanction a temporary teacher if seven children would attend.

Meanwhile, a suitable location in Bandon was being considered. It had to be under the umbrella of a regular school as integration would not otherwise be possible. The local Presentation Convent School was finally decided upon and this has since proved to be a wise choice as the sisters have been unstinting in their support. The staff of the school were contacted to obtain their views. They were delighted to co-operate and suggested using their staff-room, a large, comfortable, well-lit room as a class-room. This was a very

generous gesture on their part. Fund-raising was also started and the support of the local townspeople was evident in the generous sums which were and still are donated.

All these events happened relatively quickly. The first meeting had been held in February 1984 and it was now the summer of 1984. Sanction had been promised for August, but none came. It was here that the determination and dedication of the committee members became evident. They took a firm stand on the issue and lobbied local politicians until temporary sanction was finally granted in December, until June 1985 for seven children. If the number of children increased by June permanent sanction would be granted.

The class opened on 25th February 1985 with nine children attending. This increased to ten in June.

The numbers have since expanded to sixteen children with two teachers and one child-care assistant. The children are assessed as having a moderate degree of mental handicap. Six of the children have Down's Syndrome, two are autistic and others have various forms of non-specific brain-damage. The ages range from five to fifteen years. These are divided according to age. The age range in the junior class ranges from five to nine years and from nine to fifteen in the senior class.

Their education as in all special schools is designed to develop all aspects of the child, to enable him/her to function at his/her full potential. It's fundamental objectives include the development of socially acceptable patterns of behaviour; instruction in the basic skills of reading, writing and number-work; training in sensory perception and discrimination and the development of social skills.

The development of social skills and integration with the regular classes form the basis of the approach of B.A.S.C. The children remain in the classroom for instruction in reading, writing and number-work where they require individual teaching. Specific self-help skills such as dressing, toileting and the teaching of domestic skills are also developed here. Individual children join the regular classes for such subject as crafts, P.E., religion, sewing, knitting and cookery. Senior children with a good mastery of language join the senior classes for some history lessons. The children join their own age-group where appropriate and stay with that group for a year. They also join the First Holy Communion and Confirmation classes in preparation for these sacraments. The children lunch in their own area and join the rest of the school in the yard for play-time under the supervision of



Andrew Buttimer pretending to be a duck in the 'Mirror Game' at the school sports day. Behind him (left) is Sr. Ann, Senior Special Class teacher and (right) the author.

the assistant or class-teacher. They participate fully in class and school Masses, assemblies and school outings. Two of the senior boys join the local vocational school for woodwork. Both classes travel once a fortnight to the Cork Spastic Clinic for swimming and attend a local riding school for horse-riding in the Summer and Autumn terms.

Integrating children with a moderate degree of mental handicap is a relatively unique situation in Ireland today. Some professionals feel that it is a situation which could not work for a variety of reasons. Some may feel that children in a regular school would not accept the special class children, seeing them as "different". However, this, happily, has not been the experience in the convent primary school in Bandon. The regular children accept the special children as part of their class. They play naturally and easily in the school yard and display endless patience in teaching and helping the special child to knit and sew. Senior teachers talk to the senior classes helping them to understand the nature of mental handicap and feel that their classes benefit enormously from the experience.

The attitudes of the staff in Bandon have been truly remarkable. They support and co-operate with the integration programme and do not mind the extra work which is involved.

The principal of the school, Sr Joan supports the special classes also, visiting them every day and taking a great interest in all of the children.

The children in the primary school began relating their experiences with the special children to their parents and family at home. In this way, the community became aware of the special classes and the benefits their own children received. Special children are now being included in birthday party invitations and outings with friends' families. Business people in Bandon also became aware of the special classes from their trips downtown and have often shown their appreciation in the form of generous donations to fund-raising activities.

There are many reasons which have contributed to the success of B.A.S.C. The group of principals and the committee which was set up to investigate the possibility of an alternative form of education for local children with a mental handicap displayed great determination in pursuing their aims. They also knew how to approach the Department and how and where to exert pressure when necessary. Without the support of the chairman of the school board Sr Ursula and of the principal and staff, the venture would hardly have been successful. Fund-raising activities ensured that teachers had all the equipment and money they needed. Parents were and still are very supportive and the department inspector, Mr McCann worked very hard to ensure the success of the venture.

However B.A.S.C. are not without their problems! There is extra administrative work for the principal which she did not have to contend with prior to the arrival of the special classes. Neither does she have the support or experience of a big organisation when she is confronted with a major problem. The teachers have to cope with large age-ranges and the extra work involved in planning and implementing the integration programme. The support services are poor due to recent cut-backs. Psychologists visit only once yearly and the children must pay for their speech-therapy. Children not qualifying for transport have to have alternative forms of transport arranged for them by their parents which may be expensive and/or time consuming.

However these disadvantages are minor when compared to the advantages which accrue to the children enabling them to grow up at home with their family and be educated locally with their brothers and sisters.